Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
8
Makishima Suzuki
ill. Yappen

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"I'M SO FULL OF ENERGY NOW. THERE'S FUN MUSIC ALL AROUND US, AND THIS DELICIOUS SMELL..."
Marie's stomach growled, rivaling the sound of the festive flutes and drums. She quickly covered her stomach with her hands.
Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
8

TIME TO TAKE A BREAK FROM DUNGEON CRAWLING
AND RELAX IN A SUMMER PARADISE!

Managing an inn inside an otherworldly dungeon?!

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Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 14: Do You Like Summer Fireworks?

The bamboo tube tipped over with a *thunk.*

Noticing the sound, a pair of purple eyes glanced over to the source.

Steam and the slight smell of sulfur had filled the air. The light from the sun was faint. It was getting late, and no one else was in the vicinity.

Wondering why the bamboo tube had been put in such a place, Mariabelle touched it with a finger but found no answer. The device, made from ordinary bamboo, seemed to be simply designed to tilt over once it was filled with enough water. Still confused by the perplexing object, she let out a small giggle.

There was something strange about those who lived in Japan. They were a group of people who ultimately sought efficiency and had a deep admiration for diligence. Yet, things designed for religious worship were a part of daily life and they spent their leisure time after work doing as they wished. In fact, many thought of doing nothing as a virtue.

Mariabelle released her finger from the bamboo tube, causing it to tip over from the weight of the water and deliver another satisfying *thunk*. She decided to forget about such enigmatic foreign cultures and placed a hand on a wet rock as she lowered herself into the hot springs, a soft sigh escaping her lips.

“The water’s just as nice as I imagined.”

A satisfied smile spread across her face, and her pale shoulders soon sank into the water as well.

She had visited several hot springs during her time in Japan. From local spots to secluded hot springs in Aomori, it was a bit of a strange sight for a mystical elf to be visiting such places in Japan. It was more common for her kind to bathe in clear brook water, but she found she couldn’t care less about such elven traditions. She just sighed slowly and rested her head on a rock.

The sky turned darker, and the soft *thunk* of bamboo against rock could be heard again.

Despite her blurry vision, the elf felt like she was in some sort of utopia. The lack of clothing, the steam filling her vision, and the warmth of the water soaking into her skin only added to the illusion.

Mariabelle had built up quite a lot of fatigue from her long journey. Her eyelids grew heavy, but they snapped open to the familiar, hollow sound of bamboo. She turned around and glared at the bamboo tube, wondering if it was meant to function as an alarm clock, but it didn't respond. What was the point of that thing, anyway? Perhaps it was just a toy for children and didn't have any deeper meaning. The questions only arose further as she soaked comfortably in the hot water.

She had been living in Japan from spring through the summer, so she knew the good and bad of this place quite well. Her experience living here told her the bamboo tube had some sort of function to it, but she just didn't know what.

Mariabelle glanced around her surroundings to make sure no one was around, then undid the towel wrapped around her head. A single shake of her head made her pure-white hair come undone. She ran her fingers through it, revealing ears shaped like spear tips.

She closed both eyes, placed her hands on her thighs, and waited.

Elves were well known for their sharp senses. They could sense spirits that were undetectable by common folk and could control those spirits thanks to their supernatural senses. She normally kept her long ears hidden to keep her identity a secret in Japan, but she simply had to find out the secret behind the bamboo tube.

The bamboo resounded again, but the elf girl remained still. After a long, long time, the sound echoed through the hot springs once more.

As she listened to the sound twice, then three times, a change occurred in Mariabelle. Her breathing grew quiet, and her head slowly tilted to one side. Moments before her head sank into the water, she regained consciousness with a jolt.

"Ah, I nearly fell asleep!"

The monotonous *thunk* resounding at equal intervals could surely put anyone to sleep. Mariabelle wiped the sweat from her face with a stern expression, as if she were facing a formidable foe in a labyrinth.

“Is it some sort of intricate sleeping device? No...I’m completely contradicting what I thought about earlier. I should cool down and shake off this brain fog.”

She found it unbecoming of an elf to fall asleep while trying to find the truth behind the bamboo tube. There were no such teachings in her village; it was simply a personal matter of her pride. She defiantly stood up from the warmth of the water and sat on the smooth surface of a nearby rock.

She bound her hair with her still-wet hands, and water dripped onto her pale skin. There were legends outside of Japan that claimed elves were so beautiful that anyone who witnessed them would be seeing them in their dreams, and if anyone had seen her in this moment, they would know those tales were true.

“Maybe it’s just a toy after all. Oh, the wind feels nice here.”

A gentle breeze blew by. The evening wind felt cool against Mariabelle’s warm skin, and she absentmindedly looked beyond the fence. As someone who had grown up in a forest, the sight seemed full of mystique to her. The view of the endless horizon becoming engulfed by the night made her realize just how big the world was.

She was lost in the sheer presence of the sea, the source of all life, when she heard the bamboo again. Listening to the waves and feeling the cool wind, she finally understood the meaning behind that noise.

Water dripped from her hair as she directed her pale-purple eyes behind her. Her gaze was fixed upon the bamboo tube in the distance softly hitting the rock again. Silence filled the air for a brief moment.

“Could it be...?”

She purposely spoke out to emphasize the silence further. The roar of the sea and wind remained, but by inserting that monotonous sound in between...

“Maybe it’s meant to add a moment of serenity?” she said to herself, staring at the trees planted around her in an orderly fashion.

For some reason, the sound of the nearby sea and the blowing winds made her sleepy despite always being present. The sound of the running water and bamboo hitting the rock were surprisingly pleasant and provided a sense of relief despite being in an unfamiliar place. The elf wanted to listen for longer, but it was time. She gripped her towel and used it to cover her ears and white hair, then heard a sliding door open.

“It seems you are enjoying yourself, Mariabelle.”

There stood Wridra with her black hair that starkly contrasted the elf girl’s white hair. Her physical beauty almost felt like cheating, and she clearly had no intention of hiding it.

Mariabelle had covered up her ears again after exposing them to the spirits earlier, but a longtime friend like Wridra obviously knew her secret. There was no need to hide her ears, but she could slip up one day if she wasn’t always on alert, and she had to set an example for Wridra when it came to these things. They had to keep in mind that Wridra was an extraordinary being known as the Arkdragon.

“Yes, I was experiencing something known as ‘wabi-sabi.’ Have you heard of it?”

“Hah, hah, this is a land of elegance as always. I suppose I shall let loose for once as well, considering even you have exposed your ears despite your overserious nature.”

Mariabelle put a hand to her chest in surprise, but it was too late. Wridra put a hand on her curvy hip, then out came a scaly tail.

“Hey!” the elf girl said.

“Hm, I know you have sent your spirits about to ensure no one is around. I am certain if someone does walk by, a friendly elf will warn me. So if you don’t mind...”

Mariabelle’s eyes widened, worried about what Wridra would do next. Golden hair emerged from the Arkdragon’s body, followed by a pair of sky blue eyes. The tranquility that filled the air made it hard to believe this being had once been a monster that ruled over the second floor of the ancient labyrinth, and the elf couldn’t help but gasp at the sight.

“Shirley! You want to take a bath too?”

Adorned in a rather old-fashioned robe, Shirley floated in the air above the hot springs. She observed her surroundings with a hand on her chin in a manner that wasn’t far off from that of a child’s behavior. Although she had lived for far longer than any human, this land was completely new to her, and she was learning everything from the ground up.

Wridra cracked her neck, then slowly walked over and sat on a wooden chair. It seemed she intended to follow the rules of humans and wash herself before soaking in the hot springs.

“That one has quite the appetite. It does not have much of an effect on me, but it must be quite draining for a human. Do you not find it strange that Kitase is mostly unaffected, other than a bit of hunger?”

Mariabelle was rather flustered, but then she looked over at the Arkdragon. She decided to forget about Shirley, who was poking the bamboo device known as a shishi-odoshi, and moved closer to Wridra, who was washing her hair.

“It must be a big deal for you to mention it like that. I heard he walked around the second-floor hall while Shirley was still in her terrifying ‘god of death’ form. It was like she wanted to show off her garden,” she said.

“Indeed, she was supposed to be a horrible monster that sucks the souls out of men, but she acted completely differently around Kitase and around us. Perhaps his laid-back attitude was contagious,” Wridra replied.

Mariabelle nearly laughed it off, then paused. She remembered that when she had first met him, she had torn him to shreds by attacking him with her spirits. The realization that she might have been even more violent than Shirley hit her as she lathered up her towel.

“Hah, hah, are you going to wash me? It seems your penchant for

cleanliness has become even stronger in Japan," Wridra said as she laughed.

"Oh, no, it's just that everyone else doesn't have *enough* interest in cleanliness. Lack of hygiene can lead to sickness, you know. This is one of the ways Japanese people and I think alike."

Wridra flashed her white teeth in agreement. There were many facilities where commoners could go to take a bath, and they even had baths in their homes. It was rather hard to believe, but Wridra also enjoyed such customs of this country. She could easily cleanse herself with magic but actually preferred to bathe like the commoners did.

Or perhaps she simply enjoyed being washed by such a lovely girl. Even though Wridra was the almighty and fearsome Arkdragon, Mariabelle liked tending to her black cat form. The black-haired beauty turned her face away from the elf to hide the smile that arose from the inexplicable joy that came from Mariabelle scrubbing her clean.

"Emotions may not be visible, but they can be felt by others...and they bring about change, like a stone tossed into a river. This is true for myself too. Even a terrifying monster can change."

Wridra nearly told Mariabelle she thought of her as a friend, but she stopped herself. Although she truly felt that way, it was just as she had just said: such feelings could be understood without being said out loud.

"Everything must be fresh to her now that she has been freed from the ancient labyrinth. I am not too surprised that she has joined the human raid team and begun hunting down monsters dwelling there."

"Oh, but it was a surprise for me," Mariabelle replied. "Shirley's book can seal monsters and place them under her control, right? When I last saw Kartina, I was surprised to find she had turned into a well-mannered knight. She seemed to *hate* you-know-who as usual, though."

"That one has quite a straitlaced personality. I suppose she doesn't think well of Kitase for treating that place like a playground. Hah, hah, not that we are much different."

Mariabelle was about to respond to the accusation of not being straitlaced herself, but she closed her mouth. She had remembered that she had said the ancient labyrinth would be perfect for getting some exercise while sightseeing.

Wridra flashed an amused smile, then poured water on her shoulders to rinse off the bubbles. She then pointed her wet finger at Mariabelle's back.

“It is now time to enjoy the hot springs. This is the perfect place for rest and conversation. Shirley, feel free to haunt me if you are also interested. I hear the water quality here is quite excellent. You will surely regret it if you miss out on this.”

Wridra picked up a towel and walked across the bathing area, her bare feet plopping on the wet ground. Her exposed back was beautiful even from a woman’s point of view, though the tail swaying from side to side was somewhat distracting. Mariabelle followed her, complaining internally about not getting to relax despite this being a place of healing.

Night fell, and cheerful voices rang across the hot springs. Lanterns soon lit up as if to garnish their conversations.

Countless stars illuminated the night, and the skies were perfectly clear for the upcoming fireworks competition.

§

Holding a drawstring bag with a goldfish pattern, Mariabelle looked down at her unusual wooden footwear. They made satisfying clacking sounds as she walked. This made her reveal a grin of satisfaction.

“The sound they make is so cute. So these are geta,” she said as she turned around.

Honestly, it was unfair just how cute she looked in that elegant, light-purple yukata. Her radiant hair was tied to the side, adorned with a flower-shaped hairpin. An average guy like me couldn’t resist her lovely smile as she slowly faced me. When she mouthed the words “Come on, hurry!” I threw in the white towel and walked over to her as requested.

“Be sure to walk slowly. I wouldn’t want you to hurt your feet while wearing them for the first time,” I said.

“Even *you* think I’m an easygoing person like you? Although, these do fit me so tight that I have no choice but to walk slowly,” she replied. She placed a finger on her chin and thought hard for a moment. That was when she reached out toward me to hold on to my elbow and concluded, “This should help. Your walking speed is just right too. And I’m sure you’ll take care of me if my feet get sore. No objections, I presume?”

She seemed to be quite proud of her idea and narrowed her eyes right next to my face. I, of course, was more than happy to escort her if need be.

“Sure, it’d be an honor. If it’s an order from Ms. Elf, I’d give up my life to...” I paused as I remembered our journey. “Wait, I’ve died way too many times for that line to mean much.”

She giggled and called me silly, lightly tapping my chest with her hand.

Our geta clacked as we walked down the backstreet where not many cars passed by late at night. It was hard to see the ground, but we managed to avoid tripping with a bit of caution. The people walking around us were all headed to the same destination, so there was little chance we would get lost. Suddenly, I felt a tug on my arm.

“Look, Wridra made this yukata for me. She said it’s far better quality than the ones we could borrow from the inn. I’ll have to remember to thank her later.”

I couldn’t help my lips from curling into a smile as I saw her hold up her sleeves with her fingertips to show off her outfit.

If I remembered correctly, the last time she had worn a yukata was when we had gone on a trip to Chichibu. It had left an impression because she usually preferred Western clothing, but she had smiled radiantly wearing the Japanese yukata she was so fond of. Her cheeks were pink with excitement, and it was quite adorable seeing her so full of childlike glee.

“By the way, where’s Wridra?” I asked.

Wridra was a big fan of noisy, high-energy events. It was odd that she was missing when the fireworks competition was about to start. But it was my fault for forgetting about her ever since we had left the inn. In my defense, I was preoccupied by how dazzling Marie looked in her outfit.

I then heard a small meow as if to rebuke my thoughts. I looked down and realized a black cat was silently walking beside us, but it had been too dark out for me to notice.

“Oh, you’re going out in that form tonight, Wridra? But we’re about to go to a fireworks competition,” Marie pointed out.

She waved the cat over, and it walked toward it to let Marie pick it up in her arms. The cat shot me a look as if to say, “It took you far too long to notice my absence.”

Marie tilted her head in confusion.

“How odd. I thought you loved events like these, so why go in your cat form?” she wondered aloud.

“Hmm... Maybe she’s being considerate about us,” I guessed.

“Maybe, but...something’s fishy. I mean, we were just picking out yukata together earlier. There’s no way she’s cooped up in her room right now.”

Considering those details, it did seem unlikely that Wridra would be satisfied by going out in her cat form tonight. Meanwhile, the cat in question was licking its paws as if it couldn’t hear us. Something was truly off.

The discrepancies seemed to tug at Mariabelle’s mind, but we heard something beating in the distance, and she turned around with the black cat still in her arms. Drums and flutes could be heard among the sound of the roaring sea.

“Can you hear that too? Something’s happening!”

This was what summer festivals were all about. A woman’s high-spirited song joined in, backed by the voices of several other women. The clever part of it all was the tempo that filled us with energy, as if it were inviting us to join the group. The yukata we wore only added to the festive mood, and I noticed Marie’s steps quickening their pace.

Music was celebrated all over the world, and there was a certain type of sound common across all countries when it came to festivals. They all contained a clear message: “Have fun!”

“Let’s go! We’re going to be late for the festival!”

Marie’s cheeks were flush with excitement, and I felt myself smiling broadly again as she impatiently pulled me by the hand. I just couldn’t help it. The festival had begun and would continue late into the night, so there was no need for her to worry.

“Are there festivals in your village too?” I asked.

“There sure are. We all get together when winter passes and spring arrives. Each family serves their specialties, and then we all perform the songs and dances we had been practicing. You left the village in the winter, so you weren’t around to see it,” she replied.

“I wish I’d stuck around for that. Since it’s still summer, it’ll be months before I get another chance.”

“You’re going to love it! You can get front-row seats when I sing for everyone. Let’s just enjoy this festival in Izu for now.”

I nodded in agreement as we began walking again. When we reached an empty spot near a field, we heard the *whoosh* of something flying into the

air. We looked up and saw a line of light climbing into the star-filled sky.

It must have been quite a surprise for Marie. She craned her neck to follow the light straight up and watched it erupt like a blooming flower with a loud *bang!* She let out a yelp and squeezed my arm.

This was the second time we had watched fireworks together. The first time was at a large-scale amusement park in Tokyo, but this was a whole different beast.

During Obon, pyrotechnicians put their honor on the line. Their role was to honor our ancestors and beautifully illuminate the night sky so that the departed could rest in peace. This place was a popular tourist destination where we had a responsibility to immerse ourselves in the experience and enjoy ourselves.

Marie stayed silent even as the phosphorescence faded and disappeared. Her mouth was agape with a sense of wonder. She would remain wordless for a bit longer. Several more fireworks shot up in the east to venture into the night sky. I felt another squeeze on my arm as the rings of light erupted with several more *booms.*

The street had been dim moments earlier, but it was now bright like daytime. Everyone had the same look of fascination on their face. With such a spectacular presentation before us, there was only one thing for me to say.

“Welcome to Japanese summer festivals. There’s a rule that you don’t have to be reserved during festivals. I should also tell you that there’s tasty food all over the place, so you have that to look forward to.”

Marie still seemed out of it, but then her pale-purple eyes finally met mine. At that moment, she smiled brilliantly and said, “Okay!” The festival was meant to entertain our ancestors, but I hoped the elf girl would also enjoy herself to the fullest.

Giant fireworks filled the skies as Marie and I walked around, hand in hand.

The sound of geta clacking around filled my heart with excitement too. I thought I had lost interest in summer festivals as I grew older, but I started to feel like a kid again.

Someone played instruments in the distance as the sea winds carried over the sound of shamisen, and I heard the clack of geta right behind me. I turned around and found Marie wearing an old-fashioned fox mask dyed

orange by the light of the lanterns. The mystical sight left me in awe, making me wonder if I really was in Japan. I hoped that cute fox girl would pinch my cheeks to make sure.

"What do you think? The man at that stall over there gave it to me."

Marie pointed, and a man with a towel around his head waved back. He looked scary at first glance, so I was a bit surprised by the thoughtful gift.

I did kind of understand how he felt. When Japanese people encountered cute foreign girls, they had a tendency to be kind to them... Or maybe that was just me blowing my own horn. We both bowed to the man at the stall.

"Let's go over there. There's a shop I want to check out," Marie said.

She smiled widely, and my eyes met hers, despite them being beneath the fox mask, as she took my hand to lead the way. Our geta clacked as we began walking again.

A well-illuminated portable shrine, which was being carried right next to us, brought rhythmic sounds to our ears. Marie let out a soft "Wow."

"I feel so energetic right now. There's fun music all around us, and this delicious smell..."

Marie's stomach growled, rivaling the sound of the festive flutes and drums. She quickly covered her stomach with her hands.

She looked a bit embarrassed, but I couldn't blame her. The smell of soy sauce on hot plates stirred one's appetite, and customers flocked to the stalls. A man at a stall welcomed the customers in high spirits, threw yakisoba topped with plenty of dried seaweed into a food container, and promptly sealed it with a rubber band to hand it off to another customer. This exchange caught Marie's attention, which made her stop in place before she could reach her original destination. Judging by her face, I could tell her hunger had bested her. Wondering what the issue was, I told her, "You can get both, if you'd like."

"Urgh... You're going to tempt me too, are you? But we still have dinner at the inn, so I know I'll regret it if I eat too much now. And yet, it's so hard to resist!"

Seeing her struggle between reason and her appetite, I understood her dilemma. It would be a shame not to eat at a festival. There was only one solution to our issue.

"How about we share? That way we could both eat one serving..." I started, then Marie cut me off.

“Then let’s go! There’s a long line already. We should hurry before they run out!”

She pivoted ninety degrees and pulled me in another direction. The black cat was already ahead of us, meowing as if to say, “Hurry up!” Learning languages from other worlds was a hobby of mine, but it seemed I had picked up how to speak cat along the way.

We passed through a curtain, and the stall owner seemed a bit surprised by our appearance. He had surely dealt with foreigners before, but anyone would be surprised by a girl in an Asian yukata with a black cat in hand saying, “Smells delicious!” in perfect Japanese.

Her hair as white as cotton wool, beautiful pale skin, and amethyst eyes must have been quite striking. His hands stopped cooking for a moment, but then Marie took a whiff of the aroma in the air, and the cat in her arms mimicked the motion. The stall owner then burst into laughter.

The hot plate sizzled loudly, and the man displayed a welcoming smile.

“Welcome! My food tastes just as good as it smells. I run a teppanyaki place just over there.”

It wasn’t that he looked down on the other businesses here, but he was fully confident in his food. Marie’s eyes widened as he deftly cooked the golden noodles over the hot plate with metal spatulas. I could understand where the confidence came from. He cooked a big batch of pork with crazy salt and garlic, making it a bit unique from other stalls. The scent stimulated our appetites mercilessly.

“For beauties like you two, I’ll have to give this all I’ve got. I have a duty to show you what real good Izu food is like.” The shop owner smiled at Marie and the cat in her arms. Marie seemed flattered as she returned a shy smile.

I’ve always known this, but Japanese people truly were defenseless against cute girls. I was guilty of this myself, so I couldn’t really say much. Or maybe this wasn’t a Japanese thing, but something all men had in common. As I thought about this, the man tossed some sour-sweet soy sauce onto the plate with a loud *sizzle*.

This smell was certainly one of the best parts of yakisoba as it alone reached deep into my nostrils and made me feel as if I already had a bite. Then I noticed the sparkle in Marie’s eyes as she stared at the food. She was dying to get a taste, and drool nearly dripped from her mouth, but she

couldn’t wipe it with the cat in her arms.

The man put the yakisoba in a container, then garnished it with dried seaweed to complete the dish. Marie flashed a happy smile.

“Here ya go, one special yakisoba. Enjoy it with your boyfriend there.”

“Wow, thank you! We just started going out recently! Oh, Kazuhiro-san, can you grab it for me? I have to hold on to Wridra.”

The shopkeeper looked at me as if to say, “Wait, really?” It seemed he was joking about me being her boyfriend and couldn’t imagine I was actually dating such a cute girl. I mean, it was understandable. I could hardly believe it either.

As for Marie, she was far too enamored with the food to notice the awkwardness in the air. “Let’s go eat!” she said, then took me by the hand.

The shopkeeper seemed to get it together again and shouted, “Thanks for comin’!” Once again, we were surrounded by the sound of flutes and drums.

There truly was nothing like the lively atmosphere of a festival.

§

The sight of an elf girl in a nostalgic fox mask cheerfully walking down the path was a strange one indeed.

Even so, the vermilion torii gate in front drew in Mariabelle’s curiosity. The black cat walked ahead of the pair as if to lead the way, and there was even more of a bounce to Marie’s steps as she walked without hesitation.

There was something extraordinary about an elf girl from a fantasy world dressed in old-fashioned clothing. She captured everyone’s eyes as she walked by, making them wonder if she was a hallucination in the night.

Kitase, who followed close behind her, was quite a contrast to Mariabelle. He wore a yukata to match her and had various items he had purchased from stalls in hand, but he was quite plain in appearance.

Yet he was strangely calm for someone who was guiding an elf, an ancient dragon, and the former master of the second floor. Some might assume he was selfish because of his laid-back nature, but he was quite the opposite. Instead, he was more interested in ensuring that his otherworldly guests enjoyed their time in Japan.

The sound of geta clacking against the unevenly paved path could be

heard. They say apparitions fool humans and lead them astray... Who knew where the party would end up tonight?

At the end of the secluded path was a wooden bench where a black-haired beauty stood with a fan in hand. Wridra had been waiting for them as expected, and she had a surprisingly cheerful expression on her face.

"You certainly took your sweet time," she said. "The fireworks are about to start."

"Wridra! You've been keeping this spot for us?" Marie asked.

Wridra merely smiled and extended her hand toward them as the black cat hopped onto her lap. It went without saying that she wasn't asking for a handshake, but for the items they had brought: yakisoba, okonomiyaki, takoyaki, and other food stall dishes that one couldn't go without at a festival.

"We brought you beer too," Kitase said.

"Hah, hah, that is quite commendable of you. I see why a certain difficult-to-please elf keeps you around. There is no need to thank me for keeping this seat for you. The food and drinks will suffice."

Wridra wore a black yukata that was ornamented with flower petals, and her hair was tied up instead of hanging loose like usual. Perhaps it was her exposed neckline or the way she smiled behind her fan, but there was something different about her tonight.

The moonlight suited her, and it reminded them that dragons were quite mystical, free-spirited creatures. Some of them loved to hoard treasure, while others, like Wridra, lived to satisfy their appetite for good food. Perhaps it had all started when Kitase gave her his homemade meal, but her uninhibited nature hadn't changed from the day they met.

"Here, it is your turn," Wridra said. "It would be a shame to miss out on such delicious-looking food."

"Hm? What do you..."

Before Kitase could finish his sentence, he froze. Wridra's hand was on his thigh, and through it, he felt something enter his body. He recognized Shirley's presence right away.

Wridra's red lips formed a devious smile.

"There, now Shirley and I can both enjoy the meal."

Shirley enjoying a meal meant she drained the nutrients and flavor from the body of whomever she was haunting. The Arkdragon flashed a brilliant

grin since she could now fully taste her food.

Kitase looked entirely unconcerned and began handing out food containers to the others.

“Hey there, Shirley. Did you have fun checking out the festival with Wridra?” he asked.

He could sense her nodding inside him. Through the connection formed from Shirley haunting him, he knew she was as giddy as Mariabelle and had been surprised by this foreign custom.

Shirley had been the guardian of a forest before she was bound to the ancient labyrinth as the floor master. She thought of life and death as equally valuable and held their cycle in nature up to great importance. However...

“Thank you for waiting. The second half of the fireworks competition will now begin. To our sponsors, our many guests here today, and...”

The announcement echoed throughout the venue, letting the attendees know the main event was about to begin. Instantly, the women prepared to eat in a hurry.

“Ah, it’s about to start! Hurry, Wridra!” Marie said, then turned to Kitase. “You shouldn’t drink. What if Shirley gets drunk? You should understand that’s not the best idea. I’ll have to confiscate this, but it’s not because I want to drink it myself.”

Before he could respond, she handed him a pack of takoyaki instead. He thought it was a kind gesture for her to stick a toothpick in it for him, but she followed up by saying half of them were for her.

Kitase had been really looking forward to the alcohol and was tolerant of everything up to that point. But his shocked reaction when Mariabelle took away his drink nearly made Shirley burst out laughing.

“Shirley, this is East Asian food,” he explained. “It’s very inexpensive, but people will say you’re missing out if you don’t eat it in Japan. Let’s try it out.”

Although Shirley had just recently learned how to taste by borrowing the bodies of others, Kitase was an expert at stimulating one’s appetite. One can enjoy a meal with their eyes and tongue, but he helped one enjoy food with their ears as well.

He blew onto a piece of takoyaki and took in its delicious fragrance as he brought it closer to his mouth. The moment he bit it, the flavor of the

sauce spread throughout his taste buds.

It was hard to imagine its taste from its round, cutesy appearance. The takoyaki was crispy on the outside yet soft on the inside, and the seaweed flavor passed through his nose as Shirley's eyes widened with surprise. Umami burst out with every bite of the chewy octopus. Then the girls heard something fizzing up into the night sky.

"Ah, it has begun," Wridra noted. "An annual tradition for the repose of souls. I would not have accepted anything less than the best seats for this."

The several consecutive *booms* they heard bloomed into rings of light in the sky. They lit up the great Izu sea as they arced downward and took Shirley's breath away with the fireworks' beautiful view.

There were many who mourned the deaths of others. Despite the constant cycle of life and death, the former guardian of the forest had come to believe they were both valuable. The sorrow of death and joy of birth were now completely equivalent to her.

The crowd cheered as the fireworks lit up the sky, one after another. It wasn't that they felt joy over death, but Shirley was surprised to see just how energized the participants were by the event.

"By the way, weren't we supposed to use the stuff we see on this trip as reference for the second floor? Did you see anything that might be useful?" Kitase asked. "There isn't as much nature here compared to before, and we haven't done much but eat food."

Shirley told him that wasn't true. She truly enjoyed the food and had learned plenty of things from the landscape here.

"That's good," he said. "I think this place is so peaceful now because it's been through war. We're still in the middle of going through the ancient labyrinth. After all the fighting is over, it'd be great if we could go back to a peaceful place to rest."

Fireworks continued to incessantly rain and illuminate the sky as Kitase spoke. Shirley thought it was a wonderful idea and felt warmth deep inside at the thought of the second floor becoming such a place. The floor master that had once been feared as the reaper was no more and would no longer drain the lives of others to contribute to the ancient labyrinth. She was free to do whatever she wanted.

Kitase brought a piece of okonomiyaki close to his mouth and took a bite. It tasted sweet and faintly salty, yet the cooked pork brimmed with

umami. The elf girl flashed a lovely smile. She had a habit of asking if something tasted good, which was strangely charming.

Shirley thought that she would likely never forget this sight. She smiled to herself, listening to the sound of cheers and applause from the crowd. She wanted to return to the second floor and recreate the beautiful image in her mind along with the kind friends she had met in the depths of the labyrinth.

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The sliding door opened to reveal a gracefully dressed staff member who was quite young, perhaps a part-timer, outside of our room. I realized it was the same woman who had led us here before.

“I will now bring your meal. Please make yourselves at home,” she said with a smile before reaching to her side for the food and entering.

It must have been a surprising sight for my guests from another world. There was a mountain of food piled up on a tray that took up most of the table.

Lobsters and other local Kitagawa fish were beautifully arranged on a giant ship-shaped container that had to be held with both hands. Before we could even react to the colorful display, an assortment of seasonal tempura and simmered sea bream, along with other dishes, was presented. We watched, mouths agape, as the table became full of food.

My companions weren’t quite used to the culture here—compared to those from their world. As the rice container was opened, it revealed steamy rice mixed with various ingredients. Everyone then turned to the local sake and beer as those were brought out. They seemed busy looking this way and that, but the smiles on their faces told me they were very excited for dinner.

“Surprised, Marie?” I asked.

Her purple eyes met mine. Still a bit dumbfounded, she glanced at the dishes on the table before giving me a delayed nod.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “I didn’t expect so much food to be brought out. Maybe she’s mistaking us for important people or something.”

That wasn’t the case, of course. I’ve heard that back in the old days, hot spring inns surprised travelers with luxurious meals as a sort of tradition. It was meant to entertain not only with tasty food but visuals too. Other

travelers would hear of these stories and visit the inn to experience it for themselves. Such masterful customer service has been a thing in this country since a long time ago. While information was readily available with the touch of a button these days, there was nothing more reliable than a friend's recommendation.

Wridra, who had changed into a more comfortable yukata, was next to us with her pale neck seductively exposed. She was beautiful enough to captivate everyone in the room just by sitting there, which made her slack expression all the more jarring.

The boiling pot filled the room with an appetizing aroma. Drool threatened to drip from the legendary Arkdragon's mouth so that even the staff member, who was far younger than Wridra, stared at her with a smile.

"Please enjoy," the woman said before sliding the door shut, and Wridra immediately raised her voice.

"This! This is exactly what we need on the second floor!" she exclaimed. "A magnificent mansion alone is not enough; it must be filled with enticing content. One could not be considered a true master without sumptuous meals within their dwelling!"

We stared at her blankly.

I thought the hot springs resort with a view of the sea was a good reference for building a mansion, but I didn't see how it would be possible to bring fancy meals to the other world. At the very least, I didn't want to pack a bunch of food from this world and bring it over there. There was no way I was going to sleep with a bunch of cardboard and styrofoam boxes full of food.

As I mulled over these thoughts, Marie stood up to face Wridra. I was relieved to see she was going to stop the Arkdragon from going off the rails. Marie bumped her chest with a fist as if to say, "Leave it to me!" and gave me a reassuring smile.

"Of course you're right, Wridra," she said. "Food is very important! Even if I stayed at some terrible lodging, I could let it pass as long as it had good food."

"Yeah, exactly... Wait, wh-what?" I stuttered. "Marie? You're on Wridra's side? But think about it, how would we arrange the food and the cooks? Hello? Are you two listening?"

As much as I protested, my words didn't seem to reach their ears. I

watched, flabbergasted, as they popped open some beer and poured it into some glasses.

“Readily available hot springs and delicious meals! Add in a gorgeous view, and what more could you ask for?” Marie cheered.

“Ah, just thinking about it makes my heart sing,” Wridra said dreamily. “It would be completely free for us, of course. The Yamamoto-tei we visited was a good reference. A splendid view would go hand in hand with a delicious meal.”

They seemed to be picturing some paradise in their minds. I couldn’t help but smile at their excitement, but I was completely left behind in their conversation.

Just then, I felt a sensation like that of a chiming bell. Shirley seemed to be enjoying the exchange between the two ladies and giggled while haunting my body. Even if I wanted to argue, I couldn’t help but feel elation deep inside. I had to admit that part of this feeling may have been my own. It wasn’t every day that I went on vacation with everyone, surrounded by a luxurious meal.

After giving it some thought, I finally spoke.

“Well, you have my support. However it ends up, it’ll be great if the second floor becomes a place that’s comfortable for everyone.”

I sat down on an empty seat, then a beer bottle was presented from beside me. I smiled at Marie, who was brimming with joy, and she poured me a glass.

We kept the party going pretty late into the night. I gave a toast to my friends who had raided the labyrinth together and decided to go on this trip with me.

“We’re still not done going through the third floor, but let’s celebrate our victory over Kartina and the bandits in the labyrinth. The most surprising part was when you joined the fight directly, Wridra. You usually just watch.”

“Hah, hah, I would not even call that a fight. I merely swatted away a pest buzzing around me. Though, it had been quite some time since I had seen such a large-scale battle. I was pleased to see Team Amethyst do more than adequate work among all of the participants. I shall look forward to your future endeavors. Now, cheers!”

Before I knew it, Wridra had taken over my toast. I didn't mind though, considering I was the least skilled member of Team Amethyst.

I used my chopsticks to reach for some chutoro, or medium fatty tuna. Marie had gotten a taste for sashimi on the first day of her arrival in Japan, but this was Wridra's first time. Yet the Arkdragon reached for a piece without faltering.

"What is that look for? It is only raw fish. It may not be my food of choice, but it will take more than this to surprise me."

She exhaled through her nose derisively and popped the piece of fish into her mouth. A single bite was enough to make her eyes widen.

The slices of red meat packed with umami and high quality fat made chutoro exquisite. They melted away with each bite, filling your mouth with delicious flavor. I assumed the fish was really fresh since the sea was right in front of us though I hadn't actually asked the staff where they were caught.

Wridra's lips were drawn to a tight line, and she leaned back so far I thought she would fall over. I thought she was being a bit overdramatic, but sashimi was known for shocking tourists with its refreshing taste. And no matter what country you were from, eating good food made you smile for an unknown reason.

"Oho," Wridra laughed as she covered her mouth with her slender fingers. It seemed she had never experienced something like this before, and she looked at me with widened eyes, then at Marie, and back to me again. She was like a cute little kid, even though she was far older than us.

"I will not ask for anything ever again, but can I have the rest of this for myself?" Wridra asked.

"Of course not! I don't get to have such expensive sashimi like this often, you know. Hmph, it's scary just imagining your tongue getting accustomed to luxury," Marie said, putting a piece of chutoro in her own mouth. Her brows were furrowed as she spoke, but her expression softened with each bite. "Mm, it melts right in your mouth! Ah, this is so good!"

Marie also covered her mouth. Her purple eyes widened with utter disbelief and sparkled like jewels. In the meantime, I appreciated how dazzling she looked when enjoying fantastic food.

"Don't just sit there and stare," Marie chided. "Wridra will inhale everything if you let her. Come on, eat."

She was right. I was busy watching the other two eat out of habit, but there was one more person I was supposed to entertain.

I wondered if chutoro would suit Shirley's palate. So, I picked up a piece with my chopsticks, dipped it in a bit of soy sauce, and put it in my mouth. It didn't taste like anything since my sense of taste went to Shirley, but I felt a torrent of joy raging inside me. This was actually a bit abnormal. I pictured her putting a hand to her cheek with a smile. In fact, that was probably her exact reaction, even though I couldn't see her.

I figured maybe she was a fan of natural food. The sashimi was so fresh that one could say you could feel the essence of life from it. I wasn't sure if this was actually the case, but considering she was in charge of the cycle of life, this sort of dish was probably right up her alley. I almost wouldn't mind never tasting anything if it meant she would be so elated whenever I ate.

Suddenly, Wridra grabbed my arm.

"Just what in the world is this?! This is not the fish I know! It should smell fishier and be filled with little bones. This is not simply sliced fish, is it?!" she asked.

"Hm? It *is* just sliced fish. But the fish has to be really high quality, and the chef needs to be skilled to make it taste like this. I hear you need over ten years of training before you're considered a full-fledged sashimi chef," I explained.

"Is that so?" she said, surprised. "Hm... It takes the number of years necessary for a child to become an adult just to learn how to cut fish? I knew the Japanese were abnormally peculiar about food, but I did not realize it was to this degree. Hm, this is quite the find."

Something about her comment scared me. My wallet had its limits, so I couldn't just buy a bunch of her newfound favorite dish. Unless she somehow revamped the second floor... I mean, even Shirley couldn't create seafood, right?

I fixed my attention to the carbonated drink before me. A universal rule across all cultures was that you had to drink some good beer after having good fish. Marie was already accustomed to this practice, and she drank hers with an audible gulp.

"Oh, that's right... Shirley..." I said and stopped myself, but a semitransparent hand emerged from mine and she gestured for me to go

ahead and drink.

The visuals were pretty scary, but I decided to happily take Shirley up on her kind gesture since this was a night of celebration. I tried to calm my beating chest as I took a swig of beer.

There really was nothing like having a cold drink after some high-quality fatty meat. The bitterness of barley and refreshing carbonation was extremely satisfying as it went down my throat. At the same time, a realization hit me. Shirley had given me my taste buds back for me to enjoy the beer. There was no reason for me to hold back if we were able to share my sense of taste like this.

Since this was our first trip staying at lodging like this, I might have splurged a bit. I wanted Marie to have fun and didn't consider this a waste since it would be a good reference for the second floor.

I really didn't expect the tempura, sashimi, and hot pot to go so well with drinks. The many bottles of beer went empty one after another, and as we nearly went through all of them, Wridra reached for the bottle of local sake. I had thought alcohol wouldn't have much of an effect on the great Arkdragon, but her face was red and her obsidian eyes were half-closed.

Seeing her like this, I was reminded of an old Japanese folk tale. If I remembered correctly, it was a story about slaying a legendary eight-headed and eight-tailed serpent in Izumo by feeding it alcohol until it passed out, but I was no Susanoo. The drunken Arkdragon grabbed me and asked, "Are you drinking?"

"Your first time collaborating as a team was quite good," she continued. "It was interesting to see the unconventional Kitase and capricious Shirley working together. I expected you to die several times facing off against Kartina."

Normally, a compliment from my sword master would have pleased me greatly; it was somehow disappointing when she ended her sentence with a loud burp that reeked of alcohol. Sweat was beading on her thighs and cleavage between the edges of her partially open yukata, and I had to consciously avert my eyes.

"Are you listening to me?" Wridra demanded, touching my cheek and bringing her pretty face closer to mine.

The troubling thing was that Wridra was objectively attractive, drunkard

or not. Her black eyes stared at me between the curtains of her equally dark hair.

“Hmm?” she said, tilting her head slightly.

The gesture somehow reminded me of how a black cat fixed its gaze upon prey.

“I would have died several times if it weren’t for Shirley,” I replied. “And even more times if I didn’t have Marie’s help. I’ve actually been enjoying the ancient labyrinth since there are so many formidable opponents.”

That much was probably obvious. Wridra chuckled, amused. She placed a sake cup in my hand and poured out a drink, making me think that perhaps she had acknowledged me as a man to some degree.

“Hah, hah, to tell you the truth, I have always felt that swordsmen are quite the shallow class. I assumed there was very little they could accomplish. But after watching you a lot, I have come to realize I was wrong.”

I was slightly taken aback by the Arkdragon’s words, though it didn’t seem she was going to laugh it off and take them back. I thought about it for a moment, then decided to drink from my cup. Maybe she, like many working adults, had to have a few drinks before she could let some things off of her chest. I faced her directly, and her eyes narrowed with a smile.

“Swordsmen must face their opponents head-on and fight in such close quarters that they can hardly breathe. On the other hand, we spellcasters must crush our opponents like insects before getting to know them, lest they close the distance on us.”

It was common knowledge that Sorcerers were weak against close-quarters combat, so they had to take down their opponents from afar... Other than exceptions like Wridra, that was. I wondered what she was trying to tell me. I waited without interrupting, then she smiled again and stood up. She then placed her hand on my head.

“You sheathed your sword when Demon Arms Kartina stood before you. Even if other swordsmen mock you for this, you should know I am proud of you,” she said.

The kindness in her tone made me curious whether she had only been pretending to be drunk until now. I wondered what kind of expression my sword master and legendary Arkdragon had on her face at that moment. But

with her hand patting my head as if I were a child, there was no way for me to find out.

“You are not the ultimate swordsman. You value your hobbies over your livelihood. A life dedicated to training would not suit you. But I believe you are fine exactly the way you are.”

With that, Wridra turned and walked away. She waved goodbye without looking my way and headed toward the passed-out Marie with cheerful steps.

“Now, it is time for us to sleep. We must proceed with the construction of the second floor soon, and I believe you must still invite Eve to the summer island,” she said.

She was right. With so much going on during our vacation, I had forgotten I had made a promise to Eve.

Marie was sprawled out on the ground and sleeping comfortably, her thighs peeking out of her clothes. I was glad she looked happy, but I wished her yukata was designed in a way that would cover her up a little better. I put my arm around her back and easily lifted her up.

The room was dark with the lights out, and the faint sound of Marie's breathing could be heard among the waves in the distance. Eating your fill, having lots of fun, then sleeping comfortably was the proper way to spend your vacation, but I was embarrassed to admit I had just learned this recently.

I figured the same was true for Marie, who stirred and sat up from under the comforter. She had enjoyed a day of travel, eating, and sightseeing only to look bewildered at the sight of the unfamiliar room. She still looked half asleep but let out a sigh of relief when she realized I was next to her and snuggled up closer to me, then placed her head on my arm. Seeming satisfied, her half-open amethyst eyes closed completely, and she went right back to sleep again. Adorably, her hand still clung on to my shirt despite her losing consciousness.

Wridra must have also been tired from her first time at the sea and a night festival. She slid the door open and entered the room as she realized I was still awake. She then let out a yawn and closed the door.

"My apologies for the wait," she whispered in my ear to avoid waking Marie. It sounded more intimate than usual with her lips so close, making my heart beat just a bit faster.

I heard clothes rustle; later she slid under the comforter. Despite it being summer, it was comfortable since the air conditioner was on. Wridra had just gotten back from a short soak at the hot springs and let out a yawn.

"I have become too familiar with human customs. I never imagined I would hate the thought of going to sleep smelling of alcohol. If other dragons knew I felt this way, they would fall over laughing," she said.

"I wouldn't laugh at you. I wouldn't want to sleep in a bed reeking of alcohol either," I replied.

She chuckled and whispered, "Fool," into my ear. I could feel the warmth of her breath.

"There's nothing wrong with a dragon who likes cleanliness," I continued. "We're at a hot springs resort. We can go for a soak again in the morning and enjoy the view of the Izu sea while it's still bright out. If you want to relax with your tail out, you can use the hot springs in the garden. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

She put her arms around me from behind, and I felt her chuckling. She was a married woman and wouldn't normally be so touchy with anyone, but

this was the only way for us to enter the dream world together.

“Yes, I am looking forward to it indeed,” she replied. “I simply cannot wait... Hmph. You are always saying such things. I suspect you must secretly enjoy seeing us happy. I cannot say it is a perverse hobby, but perhaps you should refrain a little.”

I mean, I only did it because I enjoyed her reactions so much. Just seeing her giddy filled me with happiness too.

Wridra squeezed me and let out a deep sigh before she fell silent. When I felt her relax completely, I realized she had fallen asleep. She had talked awfully slow, which meant she must have been exhausted. Maybe she had talked to me as a way of thanking me for staying up waiting for her.

“Good night. I hope tomorrow brings even more fun,” I whispered, though no one was awake to hear me.

I listened to the distant waves and the girls breathing softly in their sleep. The comforting sounds began to make me sleepy, and, feeling tired from the day’s events, I lost consciousness right away.

Just as I was departing to the dream world, I thought I heard the faint sound of someone saying good night, but maybe I just imagined it. It was a kind voice, like that of a goddess who watched over forests.

I then fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 15: Off to the Summer Isles

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a tent that seemed to be from the Middle Ages. And by that, I mean it looked pretty run-down. The animal hide it was made of had turned yellow from aging and the obvious lack of maintenance.

I stifled a yawn and looked around, but there was no one. There was evidence of someone having flipped the comforters over as they got out of bed, so I assumed Marie and the others had left the tent already.

“Hmm, I guess everyone’s already up.”

Judging by the brightness outside, it was already past early morning. I found it funny that I had overslept in my dreams and decided to start my day too.

There was about a half-day time difference between Japan and this world. The time difference probably varied by region, but I had gone to bed late in the other world last night. That could be why the sun was so high in the sky already.

This tent was supported by a central beam, and it was just big enough to cram in six people or so lying down. But that would be pretty uncomfortable, so half as many would be just right. We had bought it to tide us over until we had our own place in the second layer, but there was no telling how long we would be using it for. It all depended on how quickly Wridra and Shirley worked, I suppose.

A lot had happened last night, and the long drive had definitely contributed to me sleeping in for so long. I could hear mumbles outside and figured the others were being considerate by trying not to wake me up. So I let out a big yawn and decided to leave the tent.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed.

As I stepped outside, I was met with a surprise. A giant lizard...no, a lizardman stared at me, hissing as he exhaled. But this was no terrifying

monster because his scaly lips formed a friendly smile. Well, it was more like his lips separated to reveal serrated teeth.

"Good morning, Mr. Kazuhiho. The ladies have already started working on building the mansion," he said.

"Oh, you're that lizardman who was at the Arkdragon's labyrinth. Come to think of it, she did mention she called in some help."

I did remember talking to him the first time I explored Wridra's place. I almost forgot because it was so long ago, and lizardmen faces were particularly hard to distinguish. To be honest, I wasn't really sure if this was the same one.

I glanced around to find others like him walking around the vicinity. They narrowed their eyes at the sun with handmade spears in hand. There was a languid pace to their movements that was characteristic of sunbathing reptiles. Then, it hit me. It was just like the alligators I saw at Banana Wani Park.

"So, what are you guys doing here?" I asked.

"We've been told to walk around and get used to the new environment for now. We can handle caves and deserts no problem, but it takes a little while to adapt."

The lizardman gestured with a finger, an invitation to go on a walk together. I removed my shoes and held one in each hand to cross through the river. The water was cold but wasn't deep enough to get my knees wet. The lizardman glanced at me from my side.

"This would be inconvenient to do every morning. We'll make a bridge here later. Our fingers may look like this, but we're good at working with rope and wood."

He proudly showed me his hand. The fingers were about as long as a human's, yet the brutish hand made them look relatively short and stubby.

"I figured, judging by those handmade spears. Do you think you can get used to living here?" I asked.

"Yes, there's good water here with plenty of fish. And they're surprisingly delicious too. The others that stayed in the cave are actually jealous of the quality of fish here... Oh, I tend to ramble off topic. There are some things that have been on my mind."

With that, the lizardman took a slow step closer and engulfed me in his shadow. An onlooker would probably assume I was about to be eaten. Of

course, he had no intention of doing that as he just crouched down to whisper in my ear.

“I feel something strange from above ground. It’s like, the air...or atmosphere... Even Lady Wridra recognizes how good I am at sensing these things,” he said.

“The atmosphere? What do you mean?” I asked.

The lizardman made a thoughtful noise and looked up at the sky. Supposedly, he could sense something in the air but didn’t know the details because of his lack of knowledge about the surface world. Still, this felt important enough to take a mental note of at the moment.

After crossing the river and making our way up a gentle slope, a partially constructed mansion came into view. Most of the vast building site remained incomplete, and there were loads of lumber all over the place. They were being refined and hauled around by lizardmen, with some of them polishing stone too. I figured they were laborers working for Wridra for free.

A girl sitting on a chair noticed us approaching and waved. It was Mariabelle, who was in a shaded arbor near the center of the building where the vines with blooming flowers accentuated her beauty. The long-eared elf girl usually wore her sorceress robe, but she sat there in a white sundress with her feet swinging back and forth.

The lizardman waved goodbye and walked off. It seemed he just wanted to guide me here, and I thought to myself how monsters could be nicer than humans these days. I continued walking forward, then spoke to Marie when I got within hearing range.

“Good morning... Well, I might have slept in too late to call it a morning.”

“Don’t worry about it; it’s our day off. I should be the one apologizing for falling asleep so early in Izu,” Marie replied.

I laughed it off and told her it was fine. There was nothing better than getting some sleep after some good food and drinks.

“It looks like the construction is going well. The lizardmen are such reliable allies,” I noted.

“They really are. And they don’t slack off or complain like humans. Oh, I heard they’re going to make a lake on the other side of the mansion,” she replied.

Maybe I had misheard her. The thought of making a lake in the infamously terrifying ancient labyrinth was already outrageous. This place wasn't big enough, and where would they get all that water from?

As I considered this, I noticed something odd. Beyond the dense forest, I couldn't see the wall that marked the outer edges of the area.

"Wait a second..." I muttered.

"Yes, it surprised me too. Shirley mentioned she would be expanding because she gathered so many souls in our last battle. You certainly can't call this place a hall anymore."

A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead. This place was enormous now. It had already been big enough to fit several Tokyo Domes in it, but now I couldn't see the edge unless I tried really hard. Even the artificial sky Shirley had made seemed farther out, which felt like it extended into the first floor.

"Shirley is kind of amazing, isn't she...?"

As soon as I said it, I heard someone yell at me loudly.

"That's Lady Shirley to you, fool!"

I flinched, then quickly turned around to see an armored woman angrily walking toward me.

The whites and blacks of her eyes were inverted. Her golden hair was dyed black toward the back of her head and neatly trimmed around her ears, likely so it wouldn't get in the way while moving around. Her armor rattled as she approached and she took up a wide stance when she arrived at the rest area, as if to block my path.

Her voice sounded familiar...

"Hold on... Is that you, Kartina?" I asked.

"That's Lady Kartina to you! In any case, I've always known you were a coward by the way you fight. You should face your foes head-on and get cut down like a real man!" she shot back.

"But then I'd die. Oh, I see... You're helping out Shir—I mean, Lady Shirley now."

I corrected myself so she wouldn't glare at me, but she shot daggers at me with her eyes anyway.

"I am not 'helping' her! I've finally found the mistress I was meant to serve. She's perfect... It's as if she appeared straight out of my dreams. Beautiful like a goddess, her smile soothing and gentle...and she pats my

head ever so gently for the slightest work...” Kartina stopped herself from rambling excitedly. “Ah! No, I have no ulterior motives! I’ve simply found my righteous path of knighthood!”

Watching Kartina swing her arm wide as she spoke, I realized she wasn’t really the sharpest tool in the shed. Marie and I exchanged knowing looks and nodded to each other.

“Yes, Shirley has had nothing but good things to say about you. I heard you’re a very loyal and capable knight,” she said.

“What? Really? Oh my, ehe heh heh!” Kartina giggled.

“Yeah, I think she called you her trusted right hand. She actually said she wants you to think of her like an older sister. Not a lot of people get such high praise from a floor master like that,” I added, though Shirley had never said such a thing.

Kartina wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, not realizing we were joking. She then crumpled to the ground with a thud like a boxer who had been hit right in the chin.

“Y-Y-You fool! I would never presume to treat Lady Shirley like a s-sister... Ah, my nose is bleeding!”

Marie and I quickly rushed over to Kartina with a handkerchief. She claimed she was fine, but she was still unable to get up. It was hard to believe the woman wiping her bloody nose with a wide grin on her face was the same one I had fought back then. Before, she had felt far more demonic...

Kartina pointed at a nearby table, which was an invitation to have a talk.

Marie and I helped her over to a chair. We poured some tea from Arilai, and a pleasant fragrance filled the air. Kartina took a sip of the tea and let out a deep breath, her expression softening. Her demonic eyes met ours.

“I owe you two for our previous encounter, elf and human. I must be quite fortunate to be here alive, considering how all of my comrades perished. Still, I have no intention of leaking information on my homeland. I just wanted to get that out of the way,” she said.

“That’s completely fine. Besides, it was...Lady Shirley who saved you, not us. What you do from here is up to you. No one’s going to stop you,” I replied.

Her eyes widened slightly and her mouth formed the faintest smile. When she took another sip of her tea, it seemed all the tension had left her

body.

“What I want to do... Looking back, I feel as if I’ve always pursued nothing but ideals. And every time, I’ve ended up getting used as someone’s pawn. That’s why I still can’t trust my own will.”

Kartina seemed tired as she massaged her brows with her fingers. She didn’t elaborate, but her emotions were palpable. I had a feeling she had gone through unspeakable horrors before obtaining her Demon Arms.

“I plan to spend some time here and figure out what to do once things settle down. At the very least, I’m not the type to backstab someone who has shown me kindness,” Kartina said as she touched our arms.

When I looked into her eyes, I knew she was telling the truth. The smile she finally showed us was the very picture of a valiant knight. Maybe peace would reach her eventually after spending some time in this quiet land.

Feeling relieved, a thought occurred to me.

“By the way, have you seen Wridra?” I asked.

Kartina turned around slowly, then pointed at the mansion under construction. The look on her face told me she was perplexed by the fact that a mansion was being built in the labyrinth, but there was also a hint of excitement for what was to come.

§

“Hup.”

I stepped out into a backstreet in Arilai. Although it was before noon, it was a bit dark due to all of the buildings being so close together. Behind me was an abyss far darker than the view in front of us; some would even find it quite terrifying.

Despite its ominous appearance, there was nothing scary about it. A black-haired beauty peeked out of the pool of darkness, followed by an elf girl being led by her hand. We had arrived here from the second floor in the blink of an eye, a testament to the sheer power of the Arkdragon’s magic.

“Thanks for getting us here, Wridra. Are we splitting up for now?” I asked.

“Hah, hah, it was nothing. Yes, we will be doing construction on the second floor while you two go out.”

It went without saying that Wridra wore her black dress instead of a

yukata. Although they were completely different styles, both Japanese- and Western-style clothing looked great on her.

She then held a black cat by its pits and offered it to us. It looked cute with its body stretched out, but this was her familiar rather than an ordinary cat. It acted as the Arkdragon's eyes, ears, and sometimes tongue to taste whatever we were eating. The cat didn't protest as Marie accepted it.

"We'll see you again later. Goodbye, Wridra," Marie said.

We waved goodbye as Wridra stepped into the pool of darkness. The portal vanished, leaving no trace but the faint scent of the Arkdragon.

Marie and I walked side by side. She had opted to wear a mostly white outfit with long sleeves to protect her from the sun, and her long ears peeked out of the hood covering her head. It looked like she had gotten used to traveling compared to before. She noticed I was staring at her and smiled at me.

"Wridra was really determined to get that mansion built. In Japan, you call people who work on days off 'weekend carpenters,' right?" she asked.

"I'm surprised you know that. Her work is on a completely different scale, though. Maybe the inn in Izu motivated her to make something special," I said.

"Oh, I'm sure. The view, atmosphere, and food were all amazing. We've stayed in several mansions in Arilai, but Japan made me realize habitability isn't only about how spacious a place is."

I kind of understood what she meant. There wasn't a lot of available land in Japan, so the buildings there were inevitably smaller than those you'd find in Europe or America. I figured she meant that the vibrant view visible out of the windows made the rooms feel more spacious than they actually were. Maybe that was why Wridra had come up with the idea of making a lake.

"Once the lake is done, maybe you could fish in it," Marie suggested.

"Now you've got my interest. Maybe I can finally show you my fishing skills," I replied.

"Oh, oh! I want you to catch some eel for me. Ah, I'd love to have some broiled eel again."

Marie recalled the broiled eel we had before with a dreamy expression, swinging the cat, whose eyes glimmered in agreement, in her arms from

side to side. But there was a great difference in flavor between eels in Japan and this world that I chose not to mention. Marie not knowing said difference gave her a reason to support my fishing hobby. I didn't want to give them an excuse to cancel the plan to make that lake.

Our merry conversation continued until we eventually reached the main street. The blazing sun was fitting for a desert country, and the people around us were dressed appropriately for the weather.

"Let's see... First, we should pay our respects to Great Aja and confirm if that travel restriction will be an issue. That was supposed to be in effect until those bandits were dealt with, and that was already resolved, so..." Marie said.

I then noticed a familiar face as we stepped out onto the main street. Eve was sitting on an aged wooden box, then jumped down onto the stone pavement as soon as she noticed us.

"There you are. And just in time. Wridra's magic sure must be handy for meeting up like this," she said as she approached us.

Marie and I stood there with our eyes wide.

Even though she was a head taller than me in my adolescent form, what left us dumbfounded was her attire. She wore some sort of thin negligee with shoulder straps, seemingly unconcerned by the infernal sun. I could see her belly button, and her shorts were so tight that her entire thighs were exposed. She looked completely unprepared for the desert to the extent that I was surprised no one tried to hit on her as they walked by.

"Hey, Eve. That's an awfully casual outfit. You look like you're ready to enjoy your vacation," I said.

"Of course I am! We finally got rid of those bandits, so that travel restriction thingy is gonna be lifted, right?" she said.

The bandits had been cooped up in the labyrinth, planning to smuggle Magic Stones into the neighboring country of Gedovar. Arilai had issued a restriction to prevent anyone from leaving its land until the traitors assisting enemy nations were dealt with.

"It was a shame it prevented us from going on our trip," Marie said.

"Hee hee, it is what it is. Anyway, let's go see Great Aja already. Oh, I can't wait to see the beach! Guess we're really goin', huh?"

In contrast to the pouting Marie, Eve cheerfully led the way with light steps. Not enough fabric covered her butt, so when her feet moved from one

side to the other... Uh, I shouldn't be looking at that.

The plan was to talk to Great Aja, stock up on some rice and other food, and check out the beach.

The Ord Sea to the east was known as a midsummer paradise, and it would normally take several months to get there on foot. But Trayn, the Journey's Guide, could easily get us there—the perfect skill for a travel enthusiast like me.

We still had the S-Rank mission of clearing the third floor, so we couldn't stay there for long, but Sir Hakam and Great Aja had given the green light for us to take a few days off. I doubted there would be any issues.

I looked up at the blue sky. It was the middle of summer in this world too.

Whoosh...

We were surrounded by complete darkness, with pockets of light occasionally zooming by because of how fast we went. It felt like we were in a subway, but this was just how my long-distance travel skill, Trayn, the Journey's Guide, looked in action. Fortunately, the wind was relatively tame. Mariabelle had been distracted by the sight before us for a moment, but she quickly went back to checking our bag.

"It looks like we're set. The rice and vegetables, the seasonings and meat we brought from Japan, yesterday's leftovers, and the toys are all here," she said.

"I wish we could have prepared lunch boxes, but we're in the middle of our Izu trip. Though, this might be a good opportunity for some outdoor cooking. It's always been popular for good reason," I replied.

The black cat in Marie's arms meowed as if to express its excitement. My only concern was that I still didn't know how much the Arkdragon was capable of eating, so I wasn't sure if we had brought enough food.

We now headed to the beach at the Ord Sea.

The restriction on leaving the country had been lifted just for us recently. If it hadn't, we wouldn't have even been able to activate my travel skill. Our battle with the bandits ended up being on a much bigger scale than expected even if everything worked out with us being able to go on a vacation at the beach.

But ever since we had talked to Great Aja, we had been struggling to wrap our heads around the peculiar situation we found ourselves in. Marie had been groaning deep in thought and finally turned to me to voice her confusion.

“I don’t understand why he gave us special permission to cross the border without lifting the travel restriction. The threat was dealt with, wasn’t it? It doesn’t make sense,” she said.

Our original plan to go on this beach trip was set back because of the restriction. We were told the restriction would be lifted once the bandits were dealt with, but it didn’t seem like that would be happening any time soon.

“Yeah... Maybe it means there’s still a threat out there. Something other than bandits trying to smuggle Magic Stones or traitors in hiding,” I remarked. “Considering the fact that the bandits’ defeat was never announced to the public, maybe it was just an excuse.”

Imposing a travel restriction had obvious disadvantages for the entire country. It put a halt on trade, which meant the economy would stagnate. There had to be some other advantage to the restriction to make the negative aspects worth it.

“Not to mention, Great Aja asked us if we wanted Arilai citizenship. Even though I’m fond of this place after being here for a while, it was so sudden,” Marie pointed out.

“Yeah, he even offered to reimburse any penalties you’d have to pay to leave the Sorcerer’s Guild. I’m glad he trusts us, but it felt like he was in a rush or something,” I agreed.

It was possible that this invitation and the seemingly unrelated travel restriction were actually connected somehow. Without much information to work with, our speculation could be wildly off the mark. We decided not to think about it too much and to switch gears to enjoy our vacation like we originally planned.

I glanced over at the black cat, which sat there quietly.

“Once we get to the beach, we’ll regroup with you,” I said to the black cat to communicate with Wridra. “It’s so convenient that you can teleport wherever you want as long as you have the coordinates. I can only travel between specific places like train stations, so it’s not all that flexible.”

“Oh, Wridra, would you mind bringing Eve with you when you join us?

She said she's going to tell Team Diamond she's going out, then return to the spot she was at earlier."

The cat meowed as if to say it was no problem.

As the movement skill I was using now had a weight restriction, it could barely handle us and the food we brought. On the other hand, the Arkdragon could easily travel to her destination without worrying about weight limits. I really envied her.

Marie giggled.

"I wonder if Eve will be able to convince Puseri to let her go out without telling her about us," she said.

"Supposedly, she's a master at hiding information because she's a ninja. Do you know what that's called in Japan?"

"Hehe, yes. They call that a 'flag,' right?"

I clapped, impressed by her knowledge, and Marie just smiled proudly.

Ever since she had learned Japanese, Marie had been reading all sorts of Japanese entertainment, like manga. Learning a new language didn't just let you converse with others; it also allowed you to absorb cultures that were very different from your own.

"Learning Japanese was very valuable to me because there's so much to know, and it makes every day so fulfilling. Eve is more considerate than she looks, so I'm sure she really wants to go to Japan. She seemed envious whenever we talked about our Izu trip."

I had no idea. Yet I thought that if that was true, it might be a good idea to invite her to my neighborhood. But I heard she had been managing the former hero candidate Zarish with her ring, so we would need to confirm if that would be an issue.

Suddenly, we felt the ground rattling beneath us, signaling that we were nearing our destination. A bright light approached us from up ahead as if we were about to exit a long tunnel. We narrowed our eyes against the sun, then found ourselves on an island in the Ord Sea.

We could see the cobalt blue expanse of the sea from the hill we stood on. Marie let out a happy "Wow!" at the gentle slope of the white sandy beach. She ran off toward the wondrous sight before her, completely forgetting about our promise to meet up with the others.

§

Evelyn, also known as Eve, was an expert in information management and a ninja, which were quite rare. Ninjas were known for their ability to disrupt the enemy and turn a battle in their favor with their sheer agility, but information was actually their greatest tool.

She had mastered research about the labyrinth, disarming traps, and espionage. However, Eve's distinctiveness as a dark elf made her give up on disguises. While she was more of the intellectual type, she was often mistaken for an ignorant musclehead due to her well-trained physique.

Eve grunted and tightened her fists in front of the reception room.

She would have to perfectly execute her plan to report to Puseri, the leader of Team Diamond. Wridra's transportation magic was too convenient, and things could get complicated if anyone found out about it. Kitase's group didn't like standing out, so they had agreed to let Eve join their trip under the condition that she kept their secret hidden.

"All I need to do now is get Puseri's permission to go. It's as easy as saying, 'I'm gonna go spend the night at my friend's place!' It'll be a piece of cake for an intellectual ninja like me."

The grin on her face could hardly be described as intellectual, but she straightened up and knocked on the door. A voice on the other side invited her to come in. As soon as she stepped inside, Eve stiffened. Several people sat around a table with documents spread all over its surface.

There was the alliance commander Doula and her fiancé, Zera of the Thousand household. Also present was Gaston, the aged elite swordsman who had joined the conquest in search of a fitting battle to die in. Puseri, Eve's master, wore a more refined dress than usual. Her twilight eyes met Eve's.

Their discussion must have grown heated just before Eve had entered, as she could feel tension in the air. Just then, her ninja instincts told her to turn around and leave.

"What is it, Eve? We're in the middle of an important meeting," Puseri said.

"Ah... Aha ha, sorry to disturb you. I didn't know there were so many people here. I'm gonna go out with some friends, so I just wanted to let you know. W-Well, see ya!"

She had said what she needed to say. She might not have mentioned that she would go far, far away or that she would stay there overnight, but Puseri

would figure it out eventually. Eve would just need to give her a souvenir from the trip, and all should be forgiven.

Having convinced herself her work here was done, Eve instinctively turned around on her heels, then she felt a hand grab her shoulder. She wasn't sure how the distance had been closed so quickly when she was so far away from the table. Eve couldn't help but let out a squeal as she felt the icy hand on her skin and heard a mass of undulating hair behind her. It was certainly far more terrifying than the horror movie she had watched with Kazuhiro.

"Might I ask where exactly you're going with so much luggage?"

"I-I'm gonna go train in the mountains! Because, you know, I'm a ninja!"

Eve managed to squeak out her reply in a high-pitched voice before shaking off the hand gripping her and running toward the door. She couldn't explain why a ninja would train in the mountains since she had just blabbed out the first thing that came to mind. The image of an intellectual ninja had vanished in that moment...or it would have, if it had ever existed in the first place.

"I see... Is it common to train in such pretty outfits these days? That looks more like something you would wear on a leisure trip... Come to think of it, I heard you were given permission to cross the border earlier. Ha ha ha, I'm very curious to know which mountain you're heading to," Puseri said.

Sweat poured down Eve's face as she slowly turned around. Perhaps she shouldn't have looked. There, she saw a group of men and women staring at her with deep curiosity. She could hear the sound of her plan to go on a beach trip crumbling before her.

"I wanna gooo! I wanna go to the beach!!!"

Unfortunately, she had leaked vital information without even being subjected to torture.

Her tearful outburst was a final vain effort at resistance that didn't seem to work. There was an immense distance between Arilai and the sea, yet Eve was about to be on her merry way there as if she were going to a local park. Naturally, the others wanted details about how she intended to get there.

Puseri's face grew closer, her intense smile reminiscent of a wolf before

its prey. With each clack of her heels against the floor, Eve let out a muffled "Eep" and backed away. Her knees had given out long ago, and the bystanders pitied her as she made a futile effort to rattle the door open. Puseri had closed the gap as her face cast a shadow over Eve's, and a scream echoed throughout the manor of black roses.

§

The white, sandy beach spread as far as the eye could see, and the sky above us was shockingly blue.

Our eyes were drawn to the beautiful hues of the lapping waves that changed from marine blue to white. Marie couldn't help herself, and she ran down the sandy slope while cheering aloud, one sandal held in each hand.

The black cat soon followed. Although it usually spent most of its time sleeping, it caught right up to Marie in no time. With the dazzling sunlight in their eyes, they reached the shore just as the waves were withdrawing.

Surprisingly, it was only the two of us and one cat here. We could be as loud as we wanted, and no one would hear us. With such a beautiful view all for ourselves, even an adult like me had an urge to run around like a child. But come to think of it, Marie had mentioned she was over a hundred years old.

I followed the footsteps Marie and the cat had left with our bag on my shoulder. With this whole place to ourselves, we could set up our umbrella wherever we wanted. The thing about Japan was it was crowded wherever you went, though the girls would probably be delighted despite the crowd.

"Wow, look at the sea! It's so pretty!"

Marie pointed at the horizon, her feet splashing in the water. Her face was pink with excitement, and she was far more childlike than usual. To me, her smile was far more beautiful than the beach.

I resisted the urge to grin and walked toward her.

"I was finally able to bring you here despite it being a while since we made our promise," I said.

"Hehe, I don't mind. Even if I were in a bad mood, this view would cheer me right up," she replied.

Just as Marie spread her arms, her feet were snatched by a wave. She let out a yelp and grabbed onto my sleeve, her pale thighs now completely

bare. The sand under her feet tickled and made her giggle joyously as the waves withdrew.

"Ah, this feels so nice. I can't believe such a beautiful and spacious place exists. I thought you were strange for traveling in this world as a hobby, but maybe I should reconsider my assessment," she said.

"I just like to travel to satisfy my curiosity. It was more of a personal thing, but I'm glad I could show you. Though I'm pretty sure there were more people last time I was here."

Transportation was inconvenient in this world, but this beach was beautiful enough to be a tourist attraction. It was quite perplexing to see that there wasn't a single soul around.

Marie also looked around and blinked.

"Is that so? But it's nice that we get this place all to ourselves," she said.

"Maybe we just happened to come on an off day. Well, I guess there's no point in thinking about it. We should just prepare some shade for when Wridra and Eve get here."

I looked at the black cat as I spoke, which meowed in response. The cat wasn't just here for fun. Rather, it gave Wridra a means of tracking our location.

And of course, there was no such thing as a parasol in this world. If we wanted something, we had to make it using wood and leaves in the area. The view might have been pretty, but the intense heat meant we needed some shade to rest in.

"I'm surprised you take these things seriously. I knew you were like that in Japan, but I thought you just spent your time goofing off, fighting monsters, or getting eaten in this world."

I nearly replied that she was wrong, but she wasn't too far off the mark. I mean, who would want to work even in their dreams?

"I don't need to work that hard, though," I said.

"Oh? What do you mean?"

The answer was simple. I was a mobility specialist who could teleport wherever I wanted and could gather things in no time. And thanks to the convenient skill I had learned, Overload, I wouldn't be hindered even if I carried a bit of weight.

"I can't believe you're using your skill to be a weekend carpenter," Marie said, exasperated.

“At least it’s useful, right? I just like to be efficient, for both work and play.”

As a wave withdrew, a blot of pitch-black was left on the white sandy beach. I could tell right away that it was the Arkdragon’s magic, even without seeing the black cat running toward the ominous sight or Marie letting out a cheer.

I stared blankly when I saw who stepped out of the pool of darkness.

To be honest, I had half expected that something would happen. I had thought there was a chance Eve wouldn’t be able to make it, but I didn’t think Puseri, Doula, Zera, and even Gaston would show up. It was comical at this point.

“Aha ha ha! How bad are you at keeping secrets?” I blurted out as I laughed.

“Sorry! Kazu-kun, Marie, I’m really sorry! I’m a terrible ninja!” Eve exclaimed with shame.

Wridra burst out laughing at the sight of Eve begging us children for forgiveness. Although she had a bit of a difficult personality, it seemed she had accepted the members of the alliance as her friends.

And so, our chaotic and dreamy vacation had begun.

§

I pulled a rope—that I had braided using tree bark and other materials I had scavenged in the area—tightly around some wood and secured it in place. I had a decent amount of survival skills, if I said so myself. Getting my clothes ripped up by monsters was part of the daily routine for me, so it was necessary for me to learn how to make clothes and weapons from whatever I could find. The end results were nothing compared to the work of a professional, of course, but I was able to make something good enough for us to use during our stay here.

“There, it’s all coming together,” I said, wiping sweat from my forehead.

I wasn’t a fan of working on my days off, but there was something satisfyingly fun about creating something tangible and decent without spending a dime.

This was nothing like working on a day off in Japan. I turned around to see a beautiful blue sky, sandy beaches, and a horizon as far as the eye

could see. Not many people could say they had such a view at work.

The clear seawater held on to the color of the sand for a moment before turning into a deep marine blue. And the vegetation that resembled palm trees made me feel like I was in Hawaii, even though I had never been there before. Reading a book while swaying in a hammock here must be pure bliss. As I appreciated the invigorating air of the place, I heard someone screaming for some reason.

"Naaagh! Beach, beach, beach time! Yahoo!" Eve yelled cheerfully.

The dark elf kicked the shoes off of her feet and sprinted away as she continued to shout at the top of her lungs. I could hear an audible *zoom* as she sped off into the distance. I didn't know what to say, other than "She seems excited."

"She's like a restless puppy. I hear her homeland is near the sea, so perhaps it's in her blood."

A voice spoke from beside me, and I looked over to find a woman using a sunshade umbrella. It was Team Diamond's Master Puseri, a friend from our alliance who had let us stay at her mansion a few times in the past. I bowed, noting that people from desert countries were diligent with sun care.

"Hello, Puseri. Raiding the labyrinth together was one thing, but I never imagined we'd be going on vacation together," I said.

"It appears I've imposed myself on you without an invitation. I must say, it was quite a surprise to find out you can really teleport all the way to a place like this. I was very skeptical when Eve told me. You truly do have an excellent team."

She paused, looking like she was resisting her urge to extend an invitation for us to join Team Diamond. This was a day off for us to enjoy the beach, and it appeared she had decided it would be an uncouth situation. Instead, she curled her rouged lips into a smile.

"I assume you all got permission to cross the border too?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Of course," Puseri replied. "Great Aja may not seem... Well, I suppose he does. He's grown kinder as the years passed by. He was once so strict that all of his disciples left, one after another."

I was surprised to hear that. He always looked at each person like they were his favorite grandchild.

I noticed Puseri was looking at something. There was a warmth to the

look on her face, and I followed her gaze to find Eve running around in the distance. Her tone had changed when she spoke again, and I detected what almost sounded like envy.

"I understand how she feels. My heart is pounding from excitement from seeing the sea for the first time... Though I wouldn't run around like a puppy myself," she said.

I chuckled. "Maybe you should try it once in a while. No one would laugh at you if you ran around or went for a swim. I suspect Eve will drag you into the sea eventually anyway."

Puseri's twilight eyes turned toward the sea as if she was considering it. She hid her smiling lips behind her fan, and something told me she wouldn't be so opposed to getting invited for a swim.

"I suppose I will go and enjoy the scenery until then. There won't be many opportunities like this, so I'll take it in while I can."

With that, she waved goodbye and walked off, twirling her fingers in her hair that was like undulating rose vines. I watched as she walked away in her dress that revealed her upper arms; that made me think how strange it was that a slim, polite woman with a seemingly classy upbringing boasted the greatest firepower and defensive capabilities on Team Diamond. You could never judge a book by its cover, it seemed.

Suddenly, I felt something tighten around my neck. I realized it was a massive arm and looked up to find a rugged face staring at me upside down.

"Zera!" I said.

"Hey! That Wridra sure is somethin', huh? She sent all of us here like it was nothing! I still can't believe I'm standing at the beach right now!"

Well, she was a being who was powerful enough to blow us away with a mere breath.

Wridra and Marie had gone to change earlier, so I was a sitting duck out here by myself. Another figure stepped out from behind Zera: an aged man who was just as tall as him.

"How the hell did she manage that? I've been around for a long time, and let me tell you, it's weird that she pulled off magic like that and looked completely fine afterward. I dunno why, but that woman doesn't seem like an ordinary human," Gaston said.

I felt my heart skip a beat, but I didn't let it show on my face. If someone found out she was an Arkdragon, there would be no telling what

would happen. I braced myself for more questions, but none came.

Judging by their curiosity, I had expected they would want to know more, so I was rather confused. I looked up at them and noticed they were staring at something in the distance. They had a severe look in their eyes, almost as if they were on the battlefield. *What could they be looking at?* I followed their gaze and found some familiar faces.

"Apologies for the wait, Kitase. I am rather fond of this place and its lack of humans. I see you have spent quite a lot of time enjoying trips in complete solitude," Wridra said.

"Oh, have you been wandering around by yourself in your dreams? Sorry for the wait," Marie followed.

"Don't worry, I was keeping myself busy. You both look great in your swimsuits, by the way," I replied.

"Whoa..." I heard from above.

I then realized that the sight of the two ladies—one in a black bikini, the other in a one-piece swimsuit—must have been quite a refreshing view for them. The time I had spent with the girls at the pool had made me get somewhat used to it, but the men's reactions were understandable when faced with so much exposed skin and Wridra's voluptuous figure. Even so, I felt my face getting warmer the more time I spent with them.

"So I've finally found my paradise," Zera said.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"We've been through a lot, and I've even thought of killing you, but I've come to like you. In fact, I see you as a kindred spirit now," Gaston said.

"Kill? Huh? What are you talking about?! Did I do something wrong?"

The two held me by the shoulders, only furthering my confusion, and pulled me in to form a circle. They then called out: "Let's enjoy the hell out of this summer!" "Yeah!"

Then, I finally noticed a presence that stood imposingly behind them. The woman staring with a bitter expression was Doula, the leader of the raid team. There was a silent anger in those eyes, and I desperately wanted to tell her I had nothing to do with this.

Maybe it was the nature of men to ogle women with an intense look in their eyes like wild animals waiting for their chance to strike. The term "modest" had a somewhat pleasant tone to it, while these carnivores looked unseemly in comparison.

Eve noticed the change in mood and started running toward us. It seemed like she was jogging slowly, but it took her no time to reach us. She skidded to a halt, spraying sand in her wake.

“Whoa, what’s with those outfits? They’re called swimsuits? I wanna try!” she said, eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Wridra chuckled. This dragon had a rather peculiar hobby of making clothes and was pleased whenever people complimented or became envious of her creations.

“Hah, hah, it would be a waste to spend a day at the beach in ordinary clothing. I can prepare a swimsuit for you if you wish,” she said.

“Oh, yay! Hey, Puseri, we should wear one of these things too! Then we can swim with them. It’ll be great!” Eve shouted.

Puseri, who had been walking along the edge of the water, turned around to Eve’s call. There was a smile on her face despite her grumbling, and she appeared to be pleased by Eve’s invitation. When she reached us and saw Wridra and Marie’s attire, her eyes widened.

“My, you both look wonderful. I hope you don’t mind if I enjoy the view.”

With that, she leaned in for a closer look, and Mariabelle covered her body with her arms. But the gesture only seemed to pique Puseri’s interest further, judging by the look in her eyes.

“I will not force you, of course. I am simply offering...” Wridra started, but she was quickly interrupted.

“I wanna wear it!” Eve shouted.

“I would love to!” Puseri exclaimed.

The two were taken to the changing room, and when they returned...

“Ta-daaa! Check it out!”

Eve’s smile was as bright as the sun as she spread her arms with childlike glee. From the neck down, she was anything but a child. Perhaps it was due to her impressive physique, but there was a bounce to her chest that set her apart from Wridra. I could hear comments like “Amazing” and “I’m so happy I’m alive” from the dirty old men nearby.

Needless to say, Eve was a full-grown woman who did not hesitate in showing off her body. The white fabric accentuating her dark skin obviously didn’t do much to cover her up, and her wavy blonde hair was like an ornament of its own. The men had tried to be discreet up to this

point, but they were clearly moved by the sight.

Their comments like “Wow” and “I can’t believe it” continued. I wished they’d cut it out since I was still locked shoulder to shoulder with them. They had solemn, gentlemanly looks on their faces, but there was a strange intensity to their gazes.

Yikes, I thought to myself.

“Sheesh, she looks so young, but that’s a woman’s body right there,” Zera noted.

“I have to say, that is one smokin’ body. I’ll give it ninety points,” Gaston remarked.

“Hold on, old man. Don’t count out Puseri. You couldn’t tell from the dresses she always wears, but that’s one tight waist she’s got. She looks like she’d snap in two if you put an arm around her.”

I wished they’d stop whispering their comments right next to me. Not only was it uncomfortable, but it made it harder for me to compliment Eve. I also wondered how they were so focused, yet they didn’t notice Doula glaring at them this whole time.

As I screamed internally, I noticed that Puseri was clasping Eve’s arms. The gesture was almost like a lady being escorted by a man, and she even had a timid expression on her face that was unlike her usual demeanor. Her back was still straight as an arrow though, which was very much like her.

“I enjoyed looking at them, but I feel quite restless wearing one myself. The lightness of the fabric is making me feel anxious,” Puseri said.

“Oh, but you look so cute! There’s no need to be so shy,” Eve replied.

She tried to free her arm, but Puseri hugged it again in a fluster. Red-faced, she shot Eve an angry look, then turned her nose away.

“I appreciate the compliments, but more importantly, you must teach me how to swim. Then I will play with you as long as you’d like,” she said.

“Hehe, then let’s go! I’m not that good of a teacher, so you’ll have to learn by doing. Oh, I’m so happy I get to swim with you!” Eve exclaimed excitedly.

She then took Puseri by the hand and ran along the sandy beach. Puseri was taken aback, but her surprise quickly changed to cheerful laughter. “We’re off, then!” she shouted, waving at us like a child who had just started summer vacation.

The heartwarming sight was ruined by the “See you later!” from the two

slack-jawed men waving back at them.

I thought they would eventually get over it. Those swimsuits were provocative, but I had assumed they couldn't be excited about them forever, so I just observed their behavior quietly.

But it only got worse from there.

Eve emerged from the water with a loud splash, seawater glistening off of her tanned skin. The white swimsuit clung to her body and accentuated her outlines, though the girls were too immersed in their fun to notice.

Only thin strings held up their voluptuous curves as they bounced around without realizing how precarious that support was. They frolicked around like children, but the sight from their necks down was a visual bombshell.

"GODDAMN!"

"Gaaah! Are you boys seeing this?!"

I wished they'd stop clinging to me; it made me look like I was one of them! Despite my resistance, their excitement only grew and almost made me ashamed of being a man.

"Wait a second. If they keep this up, something might slip right out..." Zera said.

"Yeah, it's very possible. In fact, I'd count on it. I have an instinct for these things. When I signal, make sure to keep your eyes peeled," Gaston added.

What sort of instinct was that? I thought he was a veteran fighter, but he just sounded like a total horndog right now.

"Um, I'm not really interested in that sort of thing," I said.

"Ugh, kids. You don't understand what kind of opportunity you'd be missing out on. You're gonna regret it in a few more years when you become a grown-up. I guarantee it."

I couldn't tell him I was already a full-grown man, and they were too busy ogling the women to listen anyway.

"So, who's your pick, old man? If we pick the same girl, we'll rock-paper-scissors for her," Zera said.

"Oh, my pick is definitely..."

We heard a *fwoosh* as something cut through the air. A shiver went down our spines as a murderous aura that surpassed anything we had felt in the underground labyrinth surrounded us.

I slowly turned around and saw how Doula stood imposingly in her flower-print camisole. It was a stark contrast to the flail in her hand, which looked like it could flatten a monster with a single swing. She tilted her head to the side, and her neck made a terrifying cracking noise.

“All I can see is Doula,” Zera said.

“What a coincidence; same here. Let’s rock-paper-scissors to see who takes her on...” Gaston replied.

Doula stepped forward with a loud *thud*, and the men took a step back. I wished they’d stop using me as a shield since she stared at me threateningly as if to say, “Stay out of my way or I’ll crush your head.”

Where did I go wrong? I thought we were just here to enjoy our vacation. Here I was in a life-or-death situation that wasn’t even my fault. And wasn’t Zera engaged to Doula? Why was he being cornered, looking like he was staring death in the eyes?

Suddenly, I felt a hand close around my wrist. I quickly turned and saw Marie standing there with a scowl, staring angrily at Zera and Gaston.

“Will you two stop being a bad influence on him?” she said sternly.

She made it sound like they’d been inviting me to ditch school or something, but I decided to keep my lips shut to not add any fuel to the fire. I let things play out on their own and quietly stood behind Marie, letting out a sigh of relief.

“C-Come on, it’s not like that. It’s just boys being boys...” Zera said in a desperate attempt to come up with an excuse.

“Don’t give me that. Your behavior is disgusting and unacceptable.”

Marie stuck her tongue out at him, then took me by the hand and walked away. She shot one last glare at them over her shoulder and whispered, “Let’s go.” To be honest, I was relieved from the bottom of my heart. I couldn’t thank her enough for saving me from certain death.

The more I thought about it, that might have been the first time I had seen such a stern look on her face. I could see the anger in her posture as she walked, especially when she turned to face me with her cheeks puffed in irritation.

“You shouldn’t go along with people like that. If you don’t like something, you need to tell them,” she said.

“I did, but they didn’t listen,” I said. “I guess I’m not good with that sort of thing.”

“That’s what’s wrong with Japanese office workers. Nothing good comes from going along with people like them, and it made me very upset. How rude, considering we saved his life.”

Marie hugged my arm, still visibly upset. I felt something soft and squishy brush up against me and sensed my face turn hot. She was too preoccupied with her complaining to notice that there was far less fabric on her than usual.

Just then, I heard a bloodcurdling scream from behind us. Yet we continued walking as if nothing had happened.

The time for our long-awaited summer vacation, known as Obon, had now arrived. Not only that, but we were spending it on a beautiful beach in a fantasy world. It didn’t get any better than this, given that another view of the sea awaited us when we woke up on the other side.

There were no crowds or annoying lifeguards in sight. I understood they were needed in case of danger, but sometimes it was hard to relax with them watching all the time. Besides, the people here today were some of the highest level members of the raid teams and wouldn’t need any saving.

Anyway, I continued working on the rest area by carrying logs to be used as tables. These were far too heavy for me to activate my skills, so I had to do it the old-fashioned way.

A woman walked alongside me, watching me with her sky-blue eyes. Wridra was with us, meaning the construction on the second floor was on hold. So, Shirley had decided to join in on the vacation but wore a pink hoodie-like garment instead of a swimsuit like the other girls. She wore shorts for her bottoms, which revealed her pale thighs, unlike her usual outfits with long hems.

Shirley followed me around curiously as I worked on the rest area. I then realized she’d been haunting me during the entirety of our Izu trip, and we had pretty much been together the whole time since.

“Don’t you want to go swimming, Shirley? You could join the others.”

I had made the suggestion because I figured it was boring watching me work, but she shook her head. She then moved close enough for our shoulders to touch, which I took to mean she preferred being here.

“Oh, that’s okay, then. I’m sure they’ll welcome you, so feel free to go play if you feel like it. I’m the type that will keep working on something till

I'm satisfied, so this will probably take a while."

She stared, blinked, then tilted her head. Maybe it was unusual to be working hard on a rest area when we were here to play, but I found that construction could be fun in itself. There was a part of me that had a desire to surprise everyone by building something impressive.

The construction itself was pretty simple. I put up one pillar for support, added some framework, covered it with some leaves from the palm tree—like plants, and tied them together with crude cords.

"Not bad for an amateur, if I do say so myself. I think it looks pretty fitting for a beach," I said to myself, satisfied.

I then looked around and thought how strange it was that there was no one around. The lack of modern transportation meant there would obviously be fewer tourists than in Japan, but I had never seen this place be completely deserted when I'd been here before.

Another thing caught my attention: the two men buried in the beach with just their heads sticking out of the sand. They stared daggers at me, but it wasn't like I had betrayed them. Gaston looked like he wanted to murder me, and I wondered what had happened to us being "kindred spirits."

I heard someone squealing and looked over to see the women playing around. They fought in good fun over the dolphin float that the Lady Arkdragon had brought from when she went to the pool in Japan.

Their laughter was pleasant to hear, and it made me glad we had come, even though all I'd done so far was work on building the rest area. Eve, who had grown up near the sea, was the loudest of the group to the point that I heard her from here.

"They're just full of energy, aren't they? I guess that's no surprise, considering we've raided the labyrinth together. You won't find people like that in modern Japan."

Shirley looked at me with an odd expression. She must have found it strange that I, the one who enjoyed fighting the most, was just sitting on a chair and relaxing. I liked swinging my sword around in battle, but there was nothing better than taking it easy when I was on vacation. When I explained this to her, she nodded, though I wasn't sure if she fully understood. She then followed my lead and sat on the seat next to mine.

"Honestly, I was more interested in this than the sea."

With that, I pulled something wrapped in cloth from my bag. I carefully removed the cloth, revealing a jewel that was the same cobalt blue as the sea. Although it was quite large and of high quality, there was unfortunately a crack right down its center.

"This is... Well, maybe it's better for you to see for yourself. It's called Roon, and it's a very important Magic Stone."

I tossed the stone into the air in an arc, and it looked like it would land on the sand. But light scattered from it in midair, and a gust of wind erupted all around us. We blinked, then saw something that fairly resembled an airplane before us.

Its body was the color of dry sand, and the feathers on the tip of its wings fluttered as it floated in place. This was the Magic Stone Roon that we had obtained in the ancient labyrinth. It had once floated in the air with perfect balance but now wobbled around precariously.

As Shirley knelt down and stared, I had to look away from her bare thighs. The brief sight reminded me of how she had once laid my head on them to use as a pillow for some reason. Maybe I was compelled to avert my eyes because I knew how her thighs felt under my head.

Her blue eyes met mine, and I gave her a small nod.

"Yeah, that wound is from our fight with Kartina. Mewi the Neko treated it the best he could, but it'll probably take a while for a full recovery," I said.

As an aside, I had invited Mewi to our trip too. Unfortunately, he said he hated water and refused no matter how much I tried to convince him.

I had been checking up on Roon like this from time to time, even if it would likely take a while until it could fly again. There were many layers of translucent feathers on the tips of its wings, some with small fractures or completely chipped.

Shirley seemed to be done observing, as she suddenly stood up. She then

walked right up to Roon and placed her hand on its body. My eyes widened as a white haze appeared from her hand and the cracks began to heal right in front of me. By the time I raised my voice in surprise, Roon had been fully healed.

"You can even heal Magic Stones? I knew you could control the cycle of life and death, but I didn't think it applied to Roon too. That's way more powerful than anything any healer could do."

She had also healed my wounds in the past. Wridra had explained something about circulating life and souls, but I didn't understand much of it as I lacked knowledge about magic or miracles. One thing was for sure: Shirley's healing didn't only apply to people.

Shirley smiled, pleased with my surprised reaction. The view of the sea must have put her in a good mood, and even Roon cheerfully made that distinctive *roon* sound.

"Maybe we could play with it too," I said to myself.

"Play how?" a voice asked.

"Well, marine sports, like... Whoa, Eve! How long have you been there?"

I spun around, surprised, and Eve stood there, soaking wet. Judging by the water dripping from her blonde hair, she must have just stepped out of the sea. I looked past her, and everyone else was far off in the distance. It was pretty impressive that she had even noticed Roon from that far away. Her sharp senses never ceased to amaze me.

"So, what are marine sports?" she asked, tilting her face toward me and flashing a smile.

Two leather seats had been secured to Roon with simple straps.

I had taken it on a test flight earlier without any issues, so we decided to have Marie and me switch off to give everyone rides. Everyone else was busy playing rock-paper-scissors while Marie and I studied a map and discussed the flight path with the best view.

"Heh heh, I'm goin' first!"

Having come out victorious, Eve hopped up and down with her hand still in the shape of scissors.

She really was strong in situations like these. Eve rushed over to us, still grinning from ear to ear. She waved at the others she had left behind and

provoked them with a “Too bad, so sad!”

Eve then leaped into the air and gracefully landed on Roon, showing off her acrobatic ability as a ninja. It was too bad she wasn’t such an expert in handling information.

The lack of coverage on her swimsuit was hard for me to ignore when she stood in front of me with her backside directly in my face. I couldn’t help but worry about her wearing something that was only supported by those thin little shoulder straps.

“Here, you should sit down. I don’t think it’ll shake much, but it’s safer than standing,” I said.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’d rather ride standing up, and I’ll be fine even if I do fall!” Eve said confidently and made a peace sign with her fingers.

There weren’t any seat belt laws in this world, so I just made her promise to sit if things got rocky. We waved at the others as Roon slowly ascended into the air.

Maybe it gained lifting power through the minute vibrations of its translucent feathers. As we gained altitude, I felt a strange sensation in the pit of my stomach, while Eve didn’t mind the height at all. She walked around on the wings for a bit, then crouched and looked down at the beach.

“This thing’s so quiet. What does it eat?” she asked.

“You mean Roon? Hm, I’m not sure. Mewi said it circulates something, but I’m not sure what or how,” I answered.

“Oh, okay,” she said and nodded, seeming to lose interest already. She probably would have reacted the same way even if I had known the answer.

Roon, roon...

We heard that noise again as we continued to rise into the air. Both of us gasped at the sight of the vivid sea far across the midsummer island. The domain of the coral reefs was a bright marine blue, and the deep, blue ocean extended far beyond.

The sound of wings cutting through the wind followed, and even the blazing sun felt insignificant now.

“So, how fast would you like to go?” I asked.

“As fast as you want! But only until I start screaming, yeah?” Eve replied and flashed that charming grin of hers.

That sounded like a challenge to me. I wasn’t sure if I could make her

scream, but I had Roon gradually gain speed. Eve felt the tropical wind with her entire body and let out a cheer.

"Ah! Whoaaa! This is awesome!"

We flew in a straight line, then in an arc, and Eve naturally took up a surfer's stance. She balanced herself with her arms and legs, supporting herself with her well-trained core muscles.

It seemed she really could handle this. I shied away as she stuck out her rather plump rear right in front of my face and moved it from side to side. Since she didn't look like she was in any danger of falling, I quickly dropped our altitude and flew us in arcing waves. Not only was she not afraid of the sudden movement, but she let out an excited cheer as she managed the difficult balance adjustments with ease.

"Ya-haa! I love this!" she shouted.

"Hey, don't get too crazy now. And Eve, can you tuck in your butt a bit? It's right in my face."

"Do that again! That was great! And the water was so close!"

She wasn't listening to me at all. She just started stomping her feet and chanting, "More, more!" It didn't look like I'd be making her scream after all.

"Oh well, I'm the one who said you can do what you want," I said.

"All right, that's more like it! Then let's go, go, go!"

It was hard to say no when she smiled like that. It made me want to meet her expectations, but maybe all men were like that. The only issue was that most of my view was blocked by her butt in front of me. Besides the awkwardness, I literally couldn't see anything ahead of us. I wished she'd be a bit more reserved in that sense.

Still, I wanted to give her what she desired.

I made us do a quick nose dive, then ascend right as we were about to hit the water. Roon accelerated on the way up, causing the sea below us to erupt in a column of water. This took Eve by surprise, and she shouted, "Ahh!"

I smiled, but a moment later, she landed on me with a *thud.* Her swimsuit-covered butt was right on my face, and I froze.

"Ah! Ahh! Eve! Your butt! Your butt's on my face!" I yelled.

"Oh, my bad. Anyway, can you do that again? How you made the water go sploosh! That was awesome!"

She was making her request with her butt still on my face!

“Okay, we’re going back to the shore now,” I said after a brief pause.

“What?! No, no, no! I’ll move my butt, so please!”

She pleaded over and over again, and we ended up flying for another half an hour or so until she was satisfied. As a result, I had learned some unnecessarily advanced flight movements like a roller coaster.

Puseri was next, but her face was pale and she outright refused after seeing us fly around like that.

§

Zera and Gaston walked along a small path, sand crunching under their feet.

They had escaped from being buried up to their necks in sand... Or rather, our alliance leader Doula had allowed them to be dug out. In exchange for being freed from their punishment, they were graciously given the opportunity to get some food from a nearby village.

“Man... I wanna get this over with already so I can feast my eyes on those swimsuits again,” Zera grumbled.

“You can say that again. I could feel my life expectancy extending just by looking at them—especially that Wridra girl. She was somethin’ else. Her pale skin and big, firm breasts...” Gaston replied.

They were greatly opposed to being sent out like errand boys at first, but they actually enjoyed the trip. After all, they could talk about these things without looking over their shoulders for women.

Zera pictured Wridra playing by the shore in her black bikini, then shook his head.

“Sheesh! I can’t believe she’d been hiding those things under those dresses she usually wears!”

“Yeah, the gap between those outfits and how they usually look is what kills me. I scoffed at the idea of an alliance with a bunch of women and children at first, but had I known I could experience this, I would’ve paid to join.”

The two men looked at each other, then burst into laughter.

As men who served their country, they never really got much of a vacation. Even on their days off, both were either training or training their

men. It had been some time since they didn't have to worry about responsibilities and could talk nonsense with someone they could relate to.

They were the masters of two different teams with no prior interactions. It hadn't been too long ago since the last time they had worked together, but they had become friends for the first time that day. The women might narrow their eyes at conversations like the ones they were having, but men tend to be simple creatures.

Still, they had to hurry and buy some food or they'd miss out on that beautiful sight. Their steps got faster until they met the pace they usually carried out during their training routines, but neither of them complained. It was strange how it didn't bother them at all when there was a carrot dangling in front of them.

The two finally arrived at a village but stood flabbergasted for a moment at what they saw.

It was basically deserted, with few inhabitants. The place must have been a fishing village in the past, but the boats and tools were in complete disrepair. There was something like an inn for tourists, but its doors were closed with no workers in sight.

"Zera, why's this place so run-down? The weather here is nice, and I haven't seen a single monster, probably because it's an isolated island. You'd think there'd be more people here."

"Only the rich go sightseeing from far away. According to Kazuhiho, this place was pretty bustling before," Zera replied.

"I thought so," Gaston said, rubbing his chin.

With a beautiful, warm place like this, the inhabitants should have had it good with abundant fish and endless tourists. Yet the people clearly didn't live well.

Zera bent his head in confusion, then decided to talk to a man standing nearby.

After they finished buying some food, the two men began sprinting at an even faster pace than before. Their expressions had turned grim after their conversation with the villager, like the expressions they wore in the ancient labyrinth.

According to the villager, an ancient creature known as the sea beast had appeared there. The place everyone had assumed to be a summer paradise

had become a danger zone. No one could go near it or catch any fish, and not a single tourist dared step foot near it. That was the answer to the question Kazuhiho had been asking himself.

It was almost two years ago that the national army was sent to protect the region, partly because of the income it would bring in from other countries. They needed to take down the monster quickly since they had committed their forces, or it would harm national interest and authority. Stalwart fighters had been gathered for the cause, but the fact that they had abandoned the island spoke volumes about how the battle had gone.

The villagers also said that the monster lurked in the sea and struck when it detected life. They had strongly urged the two to stay away from the beach, but the men had no way to contact the others.

"You've gotta be kidding me! Please be safe, Doula!" Zera shouted.

"This is bad; they've been playing out there for a while now. The monster might be heading toward them already!" Gaston said.

Even they weren't thinking about the women's alluring figures at a time like this. They dashed as fast as they could through a path lined with tropical trees, desperation in their eyes. It would be some time until they could get to the beach.

Something made a sound at the bottom of the sea.

The sound repeated, then a large number of bubbles were discharged into the indigo sea. If someone from the modern age had seen it, they would likely say it looked like a submarine. But its size was on a completely different scale, and unlike submarines, the creature had countless eyes all over it.

The monster had sensed something in the distance from the hollow of a rock it lived in. Some sort of life-form was ravaging its territory.

Vehement rage boiled up within the monster as it stomped on a nearby rock with a *thud* and scattered sand everywhere as it surfaced. Its black body immediately hardened, building layers upon layers of protection, and it activated Indestructible. The skill was unquestionably powerful, considering the ancient creature had survived until now.

And so, the sea beast had awakened. It would eradicate all who dared trespass in its waters, and when silence returned, it would go back to a deep sleep.

Its many glowing eyes opened all at once.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 16: The Ancient Beast Charybdis

The water floating in the air froze into ice with a loud fizzing sound.

This would have been a shocking sight, had it happened in Japan. But in the dream world, when surrounded by dazzling scenery, it didn't exactly knock me off my feet. Since Marie was getting used to handling spirits even in Japan, maybe she could pull this off there too.

The swimsuit-clad elf held a staff in one hand and made some minor adjustments by poking at the ice with her other hand, even though I had no idea how it worked.

"Why are you staring at me like that? It's just basic ice magic," she said.

"Is it? You're using both water and ice spirits at once, which doesn't sound all that easy to me... Oh, that's pretty."

Even the ice in this world had a fantasy-like element to it. Its design resembled a cut diamond due to how it was blimp shaped with the bottom part pointing down.

The light blue fish making water drop noises floated around with a familiar jellyfish. These were Marie's spirits, and I figured she was directing them to freeze the water from the inside out. It was a collaborative effort between the water and ice spirits to create a nice present for us.

"I guess I'm up," I said.

"Yes, please. You're good at physical work, right?" Marie asked.

I actually hated physical work in general, but I was glad to do something like this.

I took the finished ice shard and placed it on the machine Wridra had created, then turned the handle to turn it into shaved ice. Fluffy ice piled up on the plate below it. We just needed to top it off with some syrup to complete the dish. We had bought several flavors like strawberry, melon, and peach in the other world and brought them here. Just don't ask why the melon flavor was green, or why you couldn't tell the flavors apart if you

closed your eyes.

No matter where you go, people are fascinated by seeing new things. Puseri held the plate in her hand, then put a spoonful of the ice in her mouth without hesitation.

“Oh my, I didn’t know ice could be so sweet!” she exclaimed.

“Good things happen when I follow you around, huh? By the way, what’s a melon? I’ve never heard of it,” Eve said with a smile.

I wished she hadn’t asked that in front of everyone, since it wasn’t like I could tell them it was a fruit from Japan. I returned her smile, only for her to widen it again. Then, without reading the room one bit, she asked again, “What’s a melon?” Of course, I just smiled once more without saying anything.

A shadow fell over me, and I turned around to find Doula standing there. Her red hair was bound behind her, and her flower-print camisole made her look more feminine than usual.

I always thought she had well-shaped features and knew she had some admirers, but I couldn’t forget the sight of her punching Zera and Gaston and burying them in the sand. It was hard to believe she was the lowest level member of everyone here.

“You always make the strangest things. I debated whether I should yell at you when you brought out that stove in the labyrinth,” Doula said, tasting her shaved ice. “Oh, this is nice and sweet. I like it.”

“Be careful not to eat it too fast, or you’ll get a... Yeah, you’ll end up just like Eve over there,” I said.

Doula tilted her head at Eve, who was clutching her head from brain freeze.

I knew I shouldn’t have let this bother me, but it was difficult to know where to look with Wridra and Eve eating shaved ice next to each other. Both of them ate rather sloppily, and their food dripped down to their cleavage. And when they opened their mouths to eat the colorful shaved ice... Nope, that was enough for me.

After living in this world for so long, I knew that many people here had a major sweet tooth. Remembering how excited Marie got about cookies back when we lived in the forest, I thought women especially had this tendency. Still, the girls happily ate their desserts in the shade, letting themselves cool down from the sun. The beautiful blue expanse before us

made our break time feel all the more luxurious.

I felt a little tug on my arm and noticed Marie looking around curiously.

“Where did Zera and Gaston go? I don’t see them anywhere,” she said.

I looked around too and realized she was right. I had slipped away from them when they were being noisy and didn’t even realize they were missing. Truthfully, I didn’t want much to do with them.

“I sent those idiots on a grocery run,” a voice said from above. “I figured you wouldn’t have enough food with all of us joining out of the blue.”

It was Doula who had answered, and she pointed toward two holes in the sand. I hoped they wouldn’t do anything dumb again after finally being released. Some extra food would be greatly appreciated too.

“Well then, let’s start preparing the food. Since there are so many of us and there isn’t much wind, I think it would be best to use a hot plate. Then we can just cook some more once the rest of the food arrives. We can put a chair here in the shade and...” I started saying, but I was quickly interrupted.

“Slow down! You talk real fast when it comes to food. Is Mr. Sleepyhead always like this, Marie?” Doula asked.

Marie then nodded awkwardly, which was honestly a bit shocking. I thought I had been speaking normally, but it seemed they saw me as some kind of food geek.

“B-But there’s nothing wrong with that. His cooking is delicious and healthy, and it will be a lot of work to cook for so many people. He may stare at me intently while I eat, but that doesn’t make him weird or anything,” she added.

Oof. I had been secretly enjoying the sight of Marie eating, but I had no idea she knew. Thinking back, maybe I should have been more considerate.

Eve made an indistinct sound, then turned the handle on the shaved ice machine for a few seconds as she watched me with her blue eyes. She wore a bikini with a skirt, so I didn’t think it was very appropriate of her to do this with her legs wide open. If I were her parent, I probably would’ve had a thing or two to say to her.

“Speaking of which, ‘he’ loved to cook too. He was especially good at using sauce to make even cheap meat taste good. I remember the other girls got really awkward after having a taste,” Eve said.

“Yes, he was far more skilled than any run-of-the-mill chef. Have you gotten any reports since, Eve?”

Eve shook her head sadly in response to Puseri’s question. I figured they were talking about Zarish, the former hero candidate. He was in captivity in a castle, and it would take some time until he could return to them.

One thing was unclear to me: He had committed a grave crime by aiding an enemy country, so why hadn’t he been executed? This might sound cruel to consider, but I was sure the royal family knew there was a chance he would betray them again. In fact, Zarish probably knew that was a likely outcome when he turned himself in. There had to be a reason they were keeping him alive, or maybe they just weren’t sure how to handle someone who was over level 100.

Wridra, who had been cooling off in the shade nearby, overheard our conversation and beckoned us over. We complied, then she spoke with an empty container in hand.

“Hm, Team Diamond’s situation is quite complicated. Zarish may be hated by most of the other team members, but it appears they can’t fully function without him,” she noted.

“I think so too,” I agreed. “Puseri put herself in danger by taking the lead last time, and she’s much more suited to a defensive role. They’re usually positioned in the center or rear of the squad too. I’m sure she thought about how the fight would’ve gone if Zarish had been there.”

The fact that Puseri had tried to recruit us many times showed that she knew there was an issue with their current setup. Team Amethyst might have been earning recognition as of late, but there were kids in our ranks.

I had told Wridra all this without complaining when she took the shaved ice from my hand.

My intuition was that Zarish was a perfect fit for Team Diamond, in terms of combat. He was the one who had founded the team, so it was no surprise he was compatible.

Suddenly, I remembered something from when Eve had reported to Puseri about coming on this trip.

“What was Puseri’s meeting with the others about? If it was about conquering the third floor, they would have invited us too.”

“Zera actually told me something interesting,” Marie replied. “According to him, the country of Gedovar is finally...”

She closed her mouth for some reason. Her pale-purple eyes followed the horizon, then she began stepping away from us with her staff still in hand. Her long ears pointed as if she were looking for something...

“What’s wrong, Marie?” I asked.

“Maybe I’m just imagining it. I thought I sensed something...”

She looked over her back, gripping her Arkdragon’s staff. The hem of her one-piece swimsuit was quite short, exposing her pale thighs.

Marie was one of few Spirit Sorceresses, meaning she could control both Sorcery and Spirit Magic, but it took quite a long time for her to develop her skills in exchange. Ever since she had equipped that staff and honed her imagination, her skills had become indispensable in the ancient labyrinth.

I wondered what she had seen. She stared at the horizon with her back turned to us, and I had a feeling she wasn’t just imagining things. I, too, fell silent. Then, several points of light flashed along the horizon. I rubbed my eyes, thinking it was the sun’s reflection at first. But they unexpectedly increased in number. Before I knew it, there were almost enough of them to cover the entire horizon.

The ground trembled.

Marie must have mistaken it for an earthquake and grabbed onto me with a scream, but this was no natural earthquake. Heavy booms followed consecutively, and we realized a presence was approaching us.

However, there was something even more troubling. Marie squeezed me as hard as she could with her eyes closed. Men became unable to move when put in this type of situation. I knew danger was approaching, sure, but what was I supposed to do when she squealed so adorably?

A massive water eruption shot into the air, and a giant, black mass emerged from the ocean. Everyone’s expression changed at the sight of countless eyes, writhing tentacles, and hostile intensity. The cheerful air from our vacation grew dire in an instant, but everyone here was an experienced member of the labyrinth raid team and felt no fear. Doula stood defiantly, staring directly at the strange creature.

“That’s a big one. We may want to consider retreat once Zera and Gaston regroup with us. Everyone, arm yourselves to the best of your ability.”

Everyone moved at once in response to Doula’s calm orders.

I was the type to keep my weapon with me at all times, even on vacation. It was that important to me, and saying “I forgot” was no excuse if we ended up running into trouble. Armor was another matter that I couldn’t do much about.

As I dug through my belongings for my sword, Doula followed up with more detailed commands.

“You can still use that Magic Stone from earlier, I presume? I want you and Eve to ride it to scout ahead and engage the beast. Your priority is to get a scope on the creature’s power, characteristics, and level. If it looks dangerous, retreat right away. Marie, set up Prison Keeper as quickly as you can.”

I was impressed by the speed and accuracy of her decision-making. Doula had shown the most growth not just in terms of individual ability but by becoming a better commander too. She understood the characteristics of her team, didn’t stray from her defensive strategy, and never missed her chance to strike when an opportunity presented itself—the kind of person you could depend on.

Mariabelle stood before her.

“I’m going with them on the Magic Stone too. It’ll be risk free with the Astral Body I tried before, and I can support them with my skills as a Spirit Sorceress. As for Prison Keeper...”

Something glimmered on her slender finger. It was the loot she had gotten from Shirley, Tear of Thanatos, that allowed her to seal away one type of magic or ability. A tower immediately erected itself on the beach when she released Prison Keeper. Its detection range was increased by narrowing its search area to a fan shape, which won an approving nod from Doula.

“If I recall correctly, your body is left defenseless while you’re in your Astral Body form. Wridra, can I count on you to keep her safe?” she asked.

The Arkdragon shrugged as if to say it would be no problem. Not that she was conceited; in fact, there was an air about her that made it clear just how powerful and reliable she was. But there was a drawn expression on Doula’s face as if she were trying to restrain herself.

Unconditional trust can cloud judgment and result in regret if something goes wrong. The young commander already knew this, and I was sure she would grow even further in the future.

I heard a horse neigh near Team Diamond's master, Puseri. She mounted the shadowy horse she had summoned, covered half of her body with the large shield she had brought, and wielded the spear that seemed too big for her height.

Puseri's expression was far from her usual prim and proper demeanor, hidden under her helm that I couldn't see before. She exhaled a white cloud, and her twilight hair undulated like the thorns of black roses. But I noticed her purple bikini bottom peeking out of her camisole top from where I was, making it hard to watch.

"Kazuhiho and Eve will scout ahead, with Mariabelle supporting them. I want Wridra to focus on defending our stronghold. Puseri, provide support where needed as the situation changes. Shirley and I will heal anyone who's injured, so fall back to us if anything happens."

Each of us confirmed our understanding, and the battle with the unknown beast began. It was a bit weird that everyone was still in their swimsuit, though.

There were many legends of the sea creature known as Charybdis, a fearsome and ancient being that had survived since ancient times. Extremely violent in temperament, catastrophe befell anyone who carelessly stepped foot in its territory. The beast was unstoppable once it began moving, and one could only hope to live by scattering. Crewmates could only pray they didn't encounter Charybdis on a voyage, and when their prayers were not answered, they ended up at the bottom of the ocean. It was akin to a natural disaster.

Marie taught me such knowledge she had picked up from ancient texts as we flew on the Magic Stone. She was in a glowing, translucent form, and the way she gently held on to my shoulders reminded me of Shirley. This was the Astral Body she had mentioned earlier.

"It's huge. It has to be over a hundred meters tall," I noted.

Even a whale was less than thirty meters long, and the thing looked downright colossal in the water. I still couldn't believe my eyes.

We maintained our high altitude on Roon as we circled above and observed from safety as Doula had instructed. Yet we were in awe at the sheer size of the thing. Even the residents of the fantasy world were shocked as they peered over to get a better look at Charybdis.

“Look at the size of that thing! I’ve never seen a monster so big. There are a bunch of black tentacle things underwater too,” Eve said.

For some reason, Eve and Marie repeated the words “big” and “huge” as if they couldn’t help it.

Eve had gotten completely used to riding Roon from our joyride earlier and walked around with light footsteps. Marie nervously warned her to be careful, but Eve was unconcerned. After a while, Marie gave up on convincing her to sit down.

After seeing the beast in person, I understood why sailors were so afraid of Charybdis. The black mass that rippled in the blue water and headed toward the shore was nothing short of horrifying. Thankfully, our safe position up high allowed us to analyze it with peace of mind and not see it as so scary.

“You can hardly tell it’s moving from this height,” Marie noted. “Its sheer size must limit its mobility and make it very slow. From what I can see, it uses those tentacles to swim.”

“Even I’ve never seen any monster that big. According to biology, there must be a reason it ended up getting that big, like to intimidate predators or eat lots of prey,” I chimed in.

“Monsters can defy common knowledge at times, so I wouldn’t think too deeply on that,” Marie replied. “The only things that could match its size would probably be ancient dragons, which are said to be big so they can contain a massive amount of spirit power.”

I wish I could see an ancient dragon myself. I’d heard that even from a distance, their intensity was like that of an approaching typhoon. That brought to mind the time when the person I said I was envious of for seeing one in person punched me.

“What’s your take on this as a skilled Spirit User?” I asked Marie.

“Let’s see... I’ve only heard about ancient dragons from legends, but I don’t sense that sort of intensity here. The spirits in its body are a bit different but nothing too out of the ordinary. I’m trying to get a better read with the Prison Keeper I set up on the beach, but it’s blocking it somehow.”

I could sense her intellect in those purple eyes of hers as she stared quietly into the water. Her desire to solve the unknown hadn’t changed one bit since I had first met her. I obviously wanted to resolve this situation too, but we didn’t have much time, so I had to take a different approach. As I

was deep in thought, Eve turned around to face us.

"Hmm, what do you say we get a closer look? Sounds fun, doesn't it?"

I wanted to point out that this wasn't some sort of attraction at an amusement park, but seeing the excitement in her eyes, I told her, "Sure."

"We can't just sit up here sucking our thumbs forever. Doula, we're going to approach the target to observe it further and try to get a hit in," I reported via Mind Link Chat, and I got an affirmative from Doula in return.

The "hit" I had mentioned was a ranged attack with my weapon, Astroblade. This way, we could attack from a safe distance without missing such a massive target. I figured this ranged attack was part of the reason she had sent me on the scouting party.

"Leave the piloting to me. Focus on your attack," Marie said.

Both Marie and I were Roon's registered users, and I was glad she had tagged along so we could split up our duties like this. If things went south, I figured we could buy enough time for me to teleport us to safety too.

And so, we flew in an arc as I readied my Astroblade. The sword emitted a high-pitched whirring sound as it greedily absorbed my energy into the blade. Its power increased the more it drained my energy, and after some time, the sound had grown into that of a rumbling meteor.

As we glided just above the water surface, a thought occurred to me. A creature of that size had to be incredibly high in level, but Wridra had left us to handle it on our own without stepping in to help. This likely meant she thought we could take on the monster without her and trusted in our team's abilities.

"Then we'll have to make sure we meet her expectations. Let's see how this goes."

I gripped my weapon with both hands and carefully set my aim. Light glimmered through the blade like a shooting star as energy built up within it. Then, I released it all at once.

Booooooom!!!

The projectile flew in a straight line, pierced through the water's surface, and erupted in a giant column of water. The resulting wind pressure was enough to throw Roon off its flight course, but Marie calmly spoke over the noise.

"Did you see that? Charybdis's body lit up for a second! It must have spread out the impact somehow as it didn't budge from an attack like that.

Doula, the monster's unharmed and hasn't slowed its pace at all."

I was utterly shocked. I had seen the damage Astroblade could cause many times before and couldn't believe the creature had kept swimming without even missing a beat. Suddenly, Wridra's amused voice reverberated in my head.

"Hah, hah, I will tell you one thing. That thing has a trait known as Indestructible. You will need to find a way around it, or you will fail to leave even the slightest scratch on it."

"Whaaat?!" Marie and I shouted at once. What in the world was Indestructible? I wanted to complain that it was pretty unfair if it could ignore all damage.

"Do not waste your time complaining, fool," Wridra chided. "Beings such as myself contended with one another constantly in the ancient age. The fact that it survived speaks volumes of its power."

I could hardly even imagine multiple monsters like Wridra roaming around, nor did I want to. I might have loved the dream world, but I didn't want to visit the world back then.

Now it appeared my earlier attack had alerted the beast to our presence. The black underwater mass grew darker until it emerged, spraying water all over the place, and it finally revealed itself.

This was something straight out of a kaiju movie. It looked like a turtle with countless tentacles that sprouted from its body, which was covered in disgusting patterns that made it look far from friendly. The sound of countless eyes opening and closing sent shivers down my spine. Even a large, modern ship would stand no chance if it were attacked by that thing.

"So that's Charybdis... No wonder even armed fleets fear it," I said.

But this was no time to be impressed. We had assumed we were safe from our height, but tentacles extended from below the water and approached us threateningly, one after another.

I quickly swapped positions with Marie and turned Roon sharply to the side, accelerating rapidly. I thought I had heard someone cheering from behind, but it had to be my imagination, right?

"Whoaaa, this is so cool! It's just like a ride in Grimland!"

I turned around to say I'd never seen a ride like this, then saw Eve smiling brightly from ear to ear.

Usually, Marie would be telling Eve to sit down, but her vision was

spinning. She had mentioned that she wasn't affected by the environment while in her Astral Body. She floated around and wasn't weighed down much by gravity. But it seemed she screamed in my ear while clutching onto me for dear life. Somehow, she was adorable even under duress. Eve noticed this, and another smile spread across her face.

"Aha ha ha, you're such a scaredy-cat, Marie. Just have fun!"

"H-How can I find this *fun*?! And how are you so... Ahh! Ahead! Look, look, look! The tentacles!!!"

I looked in the direction Marie pointed, and giant tentacles came our way. The undersides were covered in fine, wriggling *things* used for capturing prey, which was the main reason Marie was so creeped out.

I wasn't going to let us get caught so easily. After all, I was a swordsman who specialized in mobility and made it through the ancient labyrinth without letting the monsters catch me once... Or maybe they did catch me a couple times. In any case, I was used to escaping. So I weaved between the tentacles, leaving them in my wake with a burst of speed.

The tentacles slammed onto the water with a thunderous splash. It was almost like the monster was frustrated about missing us and was throwing a tantrum.

"Woo-hoo, the water's nice and cool!" Eve cheered. "This really feels like summer, huh? Now this is a party!"

She was still all smiles, and there was a pretty rainbow behind her. I had to chuckle at the view that was so unbefitting of our deadly flight.

"I'm glad you're enjoying this, but can you sit down? Wouldn't want you to fall off," I said.

I kept an eye on Marie as I said this, but Eve shook her head. Water dripped from her golden, radiant hair.

"Nah. Flying just feels too good..." she said.

No one noticed the tentacle that was coming for her from behind. It approached from our blind spot and attacked.

The mucus-covered tentacle wrapped around her athletic body with breakneck speed. By the time I turned around, it had already tangled itself around her abdomen.

"Ahh! Eve! Don't fall, Eve! Hold firm!" Marie shouted.

"What the heck is this?! No, no, no, it's...going in my bikini!"

Eve had dropped to all fours in an attempt to keep herself from falling

off, but she now hung her head with muffled cries. She trembled, and I heard wet noises from behind. There was no time to waste, but I couldn't grab my sword to help her. Marie utterly panicked, but I had to pilot Roon so Eve wouldn't fall off.

I slowed us down and flew in an arc in an attempt to gain distance from the tentacles, but several more just closed in to try to grab us. I couldn't let my concentration fall for even a second, and it seemed like there was no way to shake them off. As I was feeling like a fish on a hook, I noticed something in the corner of my vision and turned around.

“Stay strong, Eve! Help is...”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Eve was on all fours, entangled in tentacles up to her neck. She barely endured it as she breathed roughly and was drenched in sweat. Unable to help in her Astral Body, Marie was at a loss for what to do, her eyes pleading for me to do something.

“Hold on, Eve!”

I reached back, and her hand grasped mine. It was slick with sweat and felt like it would slip away any minute, but she held on with all her might. Her muscles tensed up as she pulled, then managed to embrace me from behind. She was definitely covered in sweat. I was astonished that the tentacles had put her in such a state when she had seemingly bottomless stamina.

“Ah... Ah, no, no, no...”

Eve groaned next to my ear. She held on to me desperately, but her breathing was shallow and hot.

I wondered why the tentacles didn’t attempt to bind me when they were writhing next to me and making slurping sounds. Actually, why didn’t they just peel her off of me when they could easily do it by force?

As I thought about this, Eve grimaced and tears spilled from her eyes. She repeatedly moaned, “No,” then shuddered as if she had been exhausted.

She squeezed me as hard as she could, making it difficult for me to breathe. My eyes widened at the sensation pressing against my back. Her sweating had intensified, and I felt her convulsing against me.

Suddenly, her body lost all its strength. She was losing consciousness. Realizing I had to do something, I shouted, “Drive for me!” and stood up without waiting for an answer.

At the moment I drew my sword, I was shocked by Eve’s condition. Her face was pink, and there was something strange about her shallow breathing. The tentacles then raised both of her arms and began slipping off her bikini... Then a thought occurred to me: Could this be one of *those* monsters?

No, it can’t be. A legendary ancient monster can’t do something that ridiculous. I must be imagining things. Ha ha ha...

I heard dull thumping sounds from below and looked down to find a horse galloping across the water. Team Diamond’s master, Puseri, was riding upon her black phantom horse, pointing her giant spear in our

direction.

“Puseri, the monster got Eve! Please charge into the base of the tentacles!”

Puseri nodded and turned her sharp gaze sideways. She then accelerated as she moved in an arc, spraying water behind her and exhaling a frosty white cloud. She vanished from sight as thick tentacles enshrouded her, but a few seconds later, her spear strike unleashed a thunderous *boom*.

“It’s weakened! Marie, go full speed!” I shouted.

“Huh? Is it okay if I speed up gradually? It will be scary and make me dizzy if we go too fast,” she replied.

“Oh, uh, sure. Then speed up slightly, thanks.”

I grabbed hold of Eve by her waist, and we finally managed to escape from Charybdis’s territory. Exhaustion set in all at once. The monster was far different from what I had expected, but I also felt like I understood it.

The sea beast’s sheer size had taken me aback, but I didn’t sense anything that was typical of normal monsters. It didn’t have the same intensity as a powerful foe, nor did it have the imposing presence that made one brace for death in order to fight it. It wasn’t even trying to kill us.

“So that’s why Wridra didn’t try to get involved...”

Charybdis had only survived for this long because it used all its resources for its terrifying mass and terrible Indestructible skill. Judging by its attack just now, the creature probably wasn’t that strong. It was almost comical that its level might not even be as high as 100, despite it being hard to determine what it was.

I glanced at Eve, who had her arms wrapped around me, then quietly repositioned her bikini to cover her back up.

§

“I’m done! I can’t do this! Listen to me, we need to get away from that thing and—*ack*!”

Doula interrupted Eve midsentence by punching her in the face with full force without changing her expression in the slightest. Marie and I let out a terrified gasp.

I didn’t expect Eve to be the first one to be put out of commission. She had completely lost the will to fight after the first contact with the monster

and was slumped over as if she had lost all strength in her legs. We had no choice but to send her back to our stronghold only for her to be greeted by a fist to the face instead of a healing hand.

Blood dripped from Eve's nose onto the sand. We rushed over to help, but Doula stopped us. Still exhausted from the earlier struggle, Eve staggered before falling to her knees. Doula gave her a cold glare.

"I suspect that monster has caused great damage to the surrounding area. Tens of thousands of victims may have fallen prey to it, considering it has been around since ancient times. You find it acceptable to let the people here die just because they're from another country? Why do you wish for people to die?"

"N-No, I didn't—" Eve protested.

"Go ahead and flee. I don't need you here if you're going to complain and lower everyone else's morale," Doula spat.

Marie and I let out an involuntary "Eep." We hadn't expected things to turn so serious. Marie and I preferred peace, so we always went for wholesome titles from the library and DVD rental stores. As one could probably guess, we weren't fans of militant situations like these.

Marie silently mouthed, "I want to go home," and I was thinking the same thing. I was full of regret... Some summer vacation this had turned out to be.

"You claimed you wished to regain honor for your tainted kind, dark elf. Tell me, do you still feel the same way?"

Eve twitched. Doula's words had struck a nerve and reignited her fighting spirit. I could almost see the flames burning within her.

"Urgh! Damn right I do, idiot! When the hell did I complain, huh?! I won't lose to the likes of that thing!" Eve shouted.

"Then stand up and fight, dark elf! Fight and regain your honor!"

This was turning into a type of sports drama. Marie was completely turned off and hid behind me for some reason. I then realized she was hiding so they couldn't see her expression and I couldn't believe what she was doing, as making a face like hers would be the end of us. She was even muttering, "I want to go back to Izu already," which was exactly how I felt. Still, we couldn't just walk away since that meant things would only be worse tomorrow.

Just then, I looked up and saw that the sun was starting to set. We had to

deal with this pesky Indestructible ability and still had no idea how to even do that. This was going to be a long battle.

“What’s wrong?” Marie asked.

“If we draw this out too long, we won’t be able to enjoy Izu in the morning. We weren’t even planning to stay for so long with this many people in the first place,” I explained.

They say the view from the indoor bath when the sun rises is absolutely beautiful. We couldn’t see the sunset from East Izu because of the location, but the morning view supposedly made up for it.

I felt bad for telling this to Marie and getting her hopes up, yet we couldn’t just tell the others we were going to go home at this point. We couldn’t leave them hanging without my Magic Stone’s flight, my ranged attack, and most of all, Marie’s ability to scan the enemy.

As I let out an internal sigh, I heard a curious “Hmm.” Unfortunately, it looked like we would have to cancel our morning plans in the other world...

“It would be a shame to let this summer vacation go to waste,” Wridra said as she placed her hands on my shoulders.

I hadn’t even realized she was behind us. The simple design of Wridra’s swimsuit somehow emphasized her beauty, along with her black hair that starkly contrasted her snow-white skin. One could say she had the ideal womanly figure. Her restlessness was the only thing that ruined the mystical air that surrounded her, though I suppose that was part of her charm.

“But I don’t think there’s anything we can do. It might take a while, but Charybdis is on the way here and totally unharmed. Not to mention, Doula would be furious if we left,” I said.

“Exactly. Zera and Gaston aren’t back either, so we can’t leave with your teleportation skill. I’m sure they would find a safe place, but still,” Marie added.

“Yes, I know you do not have many options. Let us say that an Arkdragon happened to be flying by...” remarked Wridra.

Immediately after she said this, I heard wings flapping overhead. I nearly buried my face in her breasts when I looked up, so I quickly turned away. I averted my eyes before I could see her true form, but I saw Marie’s eyes light up instead. Her slim hopes of going back to Izu were now starting to look like a possibility.

“Ha ha... And let us say there happened to be a place for me to rest my wings. Ah, that monster over there looks like the perfect spot.”

We heard a monster’s scream in the distance. It sounded like a cry for help, or perhaps it was grieving the disaster that happened to befall it. The Arkdragon landed with a heavy thud, leaving the monster flattened against the seafloor and completely motionless.

Wridra then turned around and spoke out loud, “Doula, Eve, I do not mean to interrupt your pep talk, but it is time to take a break. Wait for us to rejoin you, we are going on vaca—I mean, we will rest to fight another day.”

Their mouths hung agape, and I couldn’t blame them. A giant Arkdragon just appeared out of nowhere and started grooming its wings on top of Charybdis. It then snuggled up and looked as if it were about to fall asleep.

I wasn’t going to complain though. Not today. Marie patted Wridra on the back as if to tell her good job, and seeing their secretive smiles put me in a cheerful mood too.

Doula and Eve were still frozen in place when Wridra bid them good day and turned away. I was glad we didn’t end up getting yelled at. We decided to pick up Shirley on the way and head back to Izu. We wouldn’t want to miss out on breakfast, after all.

§

The air was chilly this time of year despite it being summer. In the distance, the sky turned into an indigo gradient deeper than the ocean as the sun was about to rise over the horizon.

Even if the darkness made it hard to see the ground and it was a bit too early, this was actually perfect timing. The only sound around us was the comforting song of the sea and wind as we walked through the garden a bit farther. Ahead, we could see dim lighting through the steam.

I dipped my hand in the hot water and could tell it would feel amazing after a long, tiring trip because the temperature was just right. Maybe it was due to my Japanese heritage, but I found the smell of sulfur comforting. Though, on second thought, I knew the elf girl who had just opened the window would feel the same way.

Just this once, we were breaking a bit of spa etiquette. Marie, clad in the swimsuit she planned on wearing at the beach, raised both arms and stretched her entire body.

"Ahh, it's so nice and quiet. This is what I love about Japan... The way they can create places of comfort like it was all calculated."

"You think so? I never thought about it that way. For me, I can't help but picture people stuffed in trains like sardines," I replied.

Even the beaches overflowed with people, so I admired the elegant vacations that people had in Western countries. But that was just the image I had from watching vacation programs; I had never been there myself, so I didn't know what they were actually like.

"Hehe, that's just how it is. You didn't think elven villages were so drab, right? I would bet you never imagined we mainly ate beans."

Marie squeezed my hand with her slightly cold fingers as she spoke, grinning as if to say she couldn't wait to go for a dip. Her long ears, which were usually covered, were out in the open today.

We then wordlessly sank into the water, watching it overflow as we did so. Marie placed her head on the brim of the surface near her and let out a satisfied sigh.

"Now this is what going on trips is all about," Marie said. "Since you're the only one here, maybe I won't have to worry about manners as much."

I wondered where Wridra and Shirley were, then saw a pale, bare leg emerge from the water and rest on the edge on the other side. She was right in that she couldn't do this if there were anyone else around.

Marie's smile widened as she watched me. Maybe she was enjoying the fact that she was doing something immodest and no one was going to scold her for it. Her long hair was braided behind her head, and sweat was beading on her lovely face.

"I don't know why I'm having so much fun. I didn't think I would be taking a bath with you, and I just adore Izu. Banana Wani Garden was great too. Let's check the pictures we took later and see if they turned out okay," she said.

She gestured as she spoke, making splashing sounds that reverberated around us. Her childlike glee put a smile on my face, and the discomfort I felt from seeing her swimsuit so close naturally faded away. I mean, the fabric turned nearly transparent when wet and covered very little of her skin

in the first place.

"I don't think there are a lot of elves who would like Izu," I said.

"I don't know about that," Marie disagreed. "I'm sure there'd be a lot of fans among my friends if I invited them. Elves are much bigger bandwagoners than you know. Especially those who grew up in the forest."

In that case, I would be glad to have them over to experience Izu, I thought. I reached over to the nearby lighting and clicked it off.

It didn't turn completely dark, though. The sun was about to rise, and the horizon was a faint navy that was amazing to look at. The wind blowing this way all the way from the distant horizon was refreshing, and it felt like it would take away all my worries.

The faintly visible stars faded away as dawn came, creating a dark blue gradient in the sky. Marie craned her neck straight up and muttered, "The world is so big." She then found a comfortable spot and rested her head on my shoulder.

"Wridra complained that the hot springs were too small for her. Hehe, she's surprisingly considerate despite usually being so uncontrollable," she said.

"Wridra is kind. All dragons are. The ones that I've met were all kind, anyway," I replied.

"Oh? What did you talk to dragons about? Knowing you, I'll bet you fed them tasty food to get on their good side."

"I'll bet you'd be surprised to know that if you say 'hello,' most intelligent dragons will reply after thinking for a while," I told her. "Some of them even chuckle before saying hello back. Come to think of it, the evil ones will turn me to ash before I can get a word out, so maybe I've only met kind dragons by process of elimination."

Marie laughed, then said, "That's funny. I think you're the only person who would risk his life just to say hello. But that makes it difficult to judge."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

Marie's smile grew bigger, and her purple eyes stared into mine. She placed her arms on my shoulders and put her chin on her arm, only to continue gazing at me. I began to feel restless.

"Your theory doesn't work. Wridra incinerated us at first sight, which would make her an evil dragon. How could that be true when she's such a

sweetheart?"

"Hm? Hmmm... Right, I guess that's true. She looked awfully satisfied burning us to a crisp, but she couldn't be evil," I agreed.

Marie clutched her stomach, laughing at my ridiculously contradictory statement. It seemed she *really* found it hilarious, as she started slapping my shoulder. Once she settled down, she let out a pleased sigh.

"I'm loving this Izu trip so much. Banana Wani Garden was a blast, and the ocean view is so much more peaceful in this world. I wonder why they're so different, even though they're both so beautiful."

"But Charybdis's appearance was completely out of the blue. I'm sorry; I should have researched that place more. It's been years since I last visited," I said.

The whole situation was a huge headache. I had brought her there to have fun, but things turned into a giant kaiju hunt. It was the complete opposite of the vacation I had in mind.

Marie appeared to be feeling light-headed, so she got out of the tub and sat on the edge. Water droplets slid down her skin and illuminated it in the morning sun, making her look even more feminine and beautiful than usual. Maybe it was because of the fabric clinging to her body, accentuating her silhouette.

"This is so frustrating. If it weren't for that thing, we could have had more fun. Monsters that ruin the beautiful ocean are the true evil!"

Marie pouted and hugged her knee. It looked like she had become distracted by thoughts of the monster and forgotten what she was wearing. Her swimsuit was riding up her body, and her bare thigh made my heart beat faster.

I felt like I was betraying her trust by getting so distracted by her outfit. Still, I wished she'd consider her appearance since she was so attractive. I lowered myself into the water and blew bubbles under the surface, knowing it was a bit too much.

Just then, Marie leaned over toward me.

"Hey, what do you say we beat that thing? Then we can go back to playing again without interruptions. Plus, thanks to Wridra, we could go to the tropics any time we want."

She really must have liked that beach. This was a surprisingly combative idea coming from her, but it obviously wasn't going to be easy.

“That Indestructible is going to be a pain to deal with. We haven’t been able to damage it one bit,” I said.

“Yes, and we’ll need to overcome its powerful disruption ability too. I set up Prison Keeper, and we still don’t know what level it is. I don’t think it’s impossible to beat, though. Remember how Wridra said we’ll ‘fail to leave even the slightest scratch on it’ if we don’t find a way around its ability?”

I nodded at Marie’s explanation, which included a Wridra impersonation. Wridra knew everything and must have been hinting that we could damage Charybdis if we just knew how, but we had a ton of problems before us. First of all, we only knew a portion of our enemy’s abilities, and the creature probably didn’t even consider our first contact a battle. In fact, it had just toyed with Eve.

Marie let out a “Hm” and dipped her finger into the water. I watched to see what she would do, then she began to speak slowly.

“It may have some ways to obstruct information since I couldn’t analyze its internals. But I got a direct visual on it and some intel on everything else, like its form.”

She lifted her hand, and water splashed into the air. This might have been a simple feat for a Spirit User like her, but I was taken by surprise. She had changed the shape of the water to form a mini Charybdis. I then realized there was some sort of semitransparent creature on her shoulder. It had four legs, a long tail, and made a croaking noise, which kind of reminded me of a newt. Maybe it was the spirit of hot springs.

“Look. It’s short and sturdy, but it floated up to the surface as soon as we approached. How did it do that when it seemed so heavy?”

She poked the miniature with her finger, and I snapped to it. The spectacular sight had me lost in a daze.

“R-Right. If I were to compare it to something from this world, I guess it’d be like a submarine. They can control buoyancy by drawing in or pushing out seawater. They’re nowhere near as big, so I don’t know if it’s much of a comparison, though.”

I figured it was better to throw out what came to mind rather than give up on thinking. Marie was better at analysis anyway, so I just had to give her information that could be useful. Doing so at work just made meetings go longer than necessary, but Marie was very good at picking out the

important details.

“I’ll show you a video later, but they’re made with dual structures, and they can spit out seawater with pressurized air. Do you remember if the current changed when the monster surfaced?” I asked.

I had heard something loud when Charybdis was surfacing. The water’s surface wouldn’t have been disturbed so much if it used magic to float. There was a high chance that something in its physical design had to do with its movement.

Marie put a finger to her chin and let out a thoughtful noise.

“Maybe those tentacles were cylindrically structured. What if they could take in air from the outside to regulate buoyancy?”

The semitransparent spirit slowly sank into the hot springs. I was in awe of Marie’s skills as she made a visual reenactment by having the miniature absorb air into its tentacle.

“Hmm, but that would mean it wouldn’t be able to rise back up if it went too deep. I’m sure it can walk along the seafloor, but there are rumors that it suddenly appeared in the middle of the ocean,” I replied.

The miniature then sank into the water, as if Marie had said this idea was scrapped. I wished Charybdis would disappear this easily.

“It didn’t seem like it was using spirits, nor did I sense much magic,” Marie said. “Which means there’s a high chance you were right, and it manipulated seawater like a...sub-ma-rine?”

“Even if that’s true, I don’t know if it helps us,” I said.

“I’m surprised to hear you being negative. Of course it will help us. Maybe it wouldn’t be useful to most people, but I’m a rare and valuable Spirit Sorceress.”

Marie giggled playfully as she put a hand to her mouth. Judging by her expression, she might have found a clue on how to win. She looked like she was in a better mood than earlier as she splashed some water with her toes.

“Hehe, it’s fun strategizing like this,” she continued. “I’ve always had my nose buried in books, but before I knew it, I was on the front lines at the ancient labyrinth, and now I’m thinking about how to defeat Charybdis. That time we ended up in Banana Wani Garden too. I’m always surprising myself.” Marie spoke quietly with her eyes closed, and I wanted to keep listening to her talk forever.

“Same here, if I’m being honest,” I said. “I was always dreaming until I

started living with you. Can't blame anyone for calling me Sleepyhead."

This comment shocked Marie and made her look like she wanted to ask why I'd sleep all the time in a blissful country like this, though I wished she'd understand. It was crowded everywhere, and all the good places were expensive. You lost money by just living, and many people would agree that domestic travel just wasn't worth it.

"I never thought I'd be so comfortable living with someone else. Thinking back, I had so much fun the whole time I lived in your village."

Marie looked surprised again, but with a mixture of happiness this time. She reached over and touched my head, then began stroking my hair. There was love in her touch that filled me with happiness.

"I feel the same way, Mr. Sleepyhead. I thought I hated humans, but before I knew it, you were my favorite person. I'm sorry for trying to kill you so long ago. This goes without saying, but I'm not evil, you know."

Her words might have sounded disturbing, but we started chuckling. Maybe it was the peaceful atmosphere here, but the crisis from back then felt like a jolly memory. Even my perspective on Japan had changed, as it now felt like a fun and comfortable place to live. I even woke up early from my dreams to come back here these days.

"You know, I was surprised you could make miniatures with spirits and use them for your analysis. It was like watching some investigation in a foreign drama. Oh, speaking about foreign dramas..."

"Yes, I watch them to study Japanese, but it wasn't like I copied them. I would like to advance my techniques so I can make electronic noises and recreate bullet trajectories. But not to copy them, of course."

Wait, she wanted to go that far and still claim she wasn't copying crime dramas? I looked at her in surprise but burst out laughing when I saw her trying to play it cool. My reaction then sent her into a fit of laughter while she squeezed my arm. I didn't realize she had started watching dramas as well, and I assumed she'd eventually be the one recommending some TV shows to *me*. Then, I realized something.

"Okay then, here's a reward for a little elf who wants to solve our issue at hand. In this country, there's a long-standing tradition to reward kids who do well, so I'm going to abide by it."

"Yes, that's very important," Marie said. "That sounds great, and you have me excited to find out what the reward is. So, what is it? Knowing

you, I'm sure I shouldn't expect too much."

Despite her comment, she stared at me as if she couldn't wait to find out. I adored these mannerisms of hers and had to make a conscious effort not to smile like an idiot. Her lips were vivid like a blooming flower, and her skin was absolutely flawless. She narrowed her mystical pale-purple eyes and watched me silently. How was I supposed to resist her charms?

I stretched out my hand and reached for the clear glass on the small table behind her. Shortly after, I tossed a couple of ice cubes in it and poured a transparent, carbonated drink into the glass.

"Here you go. It's nice and cold."

I also got out of the water and sat next to Marie. When I offered the drink to her, she leaned in for a whiff. Of course, there wasn't any alcohol in it, since we were in a hot spring.

She accepted the glass and took a sip. As soon as she did, her eyes lit up. There is nothing like drinking soda when you're thirsty. The refreshing carbonation passed through her nose, leaving a subtle sweetness on the tongue. She let out a delighted sigh and smiled.

"Hehe, this is tasty."

Just hearing her say that put a smile on my face. I felt an inexplicable urge to pat her head.

By the time we put our empty glasses down, the world had brightened up. Marie placed both arms on the tub and put her chin on her arms. She watched the ocean that stretched far into the distance and sighed slowly.

"The wind is so nice. I wonder if Wridra and Shirley are having as much fun as we are. They said they wanted to model the second floor off of this place, but I doubt they could recreate it. It's not as if you could make an ocean."

She was right; only a god could do something like that. I was about to say so, but the words caught in my throat for some reason. We were talking about the legendary Arkdragon and Shirley, who had existed since the so-called Age of Night and had been absorbing life energy throughout the ancient labyrinth lately. It was hard to say what was possible when those two forces combined. In hindsight, Wridra hadn't once given up on replicating anything we saw during our travels.

Marie looked at me curiously and asked what was wrong, but I told her it was nothing.

“There’s one more thing that’s a staple when it comes to baths,” I said. “This could probably be utilized on the second floor too. Actually, the two of us can easily do it. What do you think it is?”

Some people would have guessed ping pong, but I definitely wasn’t the type to crave exercise in the morning. I preferred to spend my travels relaxing.

I extended my hand invitingly to Marie, and she squeezed it with a smile. Water cascaded from her as she stood, and she looked positively stunning backlit by the morning sun.

“Trying to spoil me again, are you? But like I said, I know not to expect too much. I’ll try not to be too disappointed, whatever it is.”

Her smile was bright enough to light up our surroundings. She looked restless, as if she were dying to know what I had in store for her. She might have just been the cutest woman in the world.

Maybe it was the heat, but I felt light-headed as I led Marie by the hand back inside.

Marie let out a strange groan. She lay on her stomach and made a different noise every time I applied pressure with my fingers. It almost felt as if I were playing the piano. She seemed to be particularly sensitive around her lower back, as she made a “Hnng” noise when I pressed her tailbone.

“How is it? Getting a massage after a bath is pretty standard, but you usually want to do it at night. Then you’d sleep well and wake up fully refreshed,” I said.

Marie looked at me with half-lidded eyes, already looking sleepy despite just waking up not too long ago. She took a few breaths before replying.

“I...I think I like it. Not bad. Just so you know, massages aren’t common in my world. It just feels different when I’m feeling relaxed after a bath... Ah! Yes, right there, right around my shoulder bone...”

She didn’t have any crazy knots or anything, but she melted into a puddle as I applied pressure around her upper back. I was glad she enjoyed this, but her yukata became disheveled as she squirmed. Her thighs and chest were even more distracting than they had been in the hot springs, and I once again wished we had done this at night.

“Maybe we could bring this sort of tradition to the second floor,” I

suggested.

“Hm? Yes, that’s not a bad idea... But we would need to make a nice bath there with a gorgeous view first. We should make some requests to Wridra and Shirley later. Also, I’d love to have some of that sweet carbonated drink again. It was delicious,” Marie replied.

I didn’t know if our wishes would come true, but we wouldn’t know unless we asked.

Just then, Wridra and Shirley came back. They were still steamy, and I could tell they loved the bath from their expressions.

It seemed Wridra didn’t dry her hair much before leaving. She cared little about her appearance to the point that her clothes were wide open at the chest, and I debated whether I should point it out or not.

“Morning baths are simply the best,” she said, then looked at us and let out an astonished “Ah.”

“You two must never get tired of each other’s presence. I understand you get along, but you spend every day and night together. You may fuse together one day and turn into Marihiho,” she added.

An image of a sleepy-looking Marie popped into my head, but the real Marie wasn’t much different since she also looked pretty sleepy. She sat up with her cheeks puffing out and exhaled sharply from her nose.

“You should teach Wridra about this culture,” she suggested. “It feels so nice; she’s missing out. I’m sure it will come in handy on the second floor.”

It sounded like she was being considerate, but she whispered into my ear, “Don’t hold back.” I wasn’t really sure what to say since I wasn’t a professional masseur or anything.

“Ha ha, plotting to take me down, I see,” Wridra said. “Very well. This body is a mere portion of my true form, and it is subject to some of the limitations of this world. I suppose your chances are higher than zero...”

Wridra lay down on the futon, full of confidence. The position she was in emphasized her curves and thickness even more than usual. I was hesitant on whether I really should touch her or not, wishing the fabric of her yukata were a little thicker.

“Get on with it, and despair. A mere child of man has no hope of overcoming me,” she taunted.

It felt strange hearing her boast like some sort of final boss with her butt directed right at me. Though, in terms of pure power, she was undoubtedly

strong enough to be one. Any hero who challenged her would probably be blown away in a second.

Wridra glanced at me with a provocative look in her eyes. It seemed she enjoyed this. And so, I decided to follow Ms. Elf's orders and overcome this challenge.

"I'm not trying to beat you, Wridra," I said. "Massaging after baths is a long-loved tradition, and many people even use it for therapeutic purposes. It's different from Shirley's ability, like a form of healing that uses the human body."

With that, I stretched out my hand. The moment I touched her, I nearly groaned. Her skin was smooth and supple, and it was moist to the touch from the hot springs.

I put my poker face on and started massaging her around the neck. The movements were monotonous and not so exciting, but I felt a warmth deep under her skin. When I applied pressure around her back, the black-haired beauty let out a stifled moan. As I touched her, I was astounded by just how thin her waist was. My fingers worked out her knots and moved up and down along the slopes of her back. She had a healthy body to begin with, but there was clearly a lot of strain being put on her shoulders, for obvious reasons. Wridra's lips slowly parted as I started massaging her neck and shoulders at the same time.

"Hm, this...feels quite good. I must say, having you serve me in this way is somewhat satisfying. But perhaps you have forgotten that you always stroke me when I am in my cat form."

She was right—as I remembered how I had patted her on the back and stomach when she was a cat. I couldn't help myself; her fluffy fur was soft to the touch. I obviously wouldn't do such a thing when she was in her humanoid form, though. As I considered this, Wridra stared at me with her obsidian eyes. "Fool," she said, but the languid movement of her lips told me she was starting to get drowsy already.

Too bad for her, Marie had told me not to hold back. And so, I placed my hands on her curvy waist and pressed around her tailbone while massaging her neck. Wridra's mouth remained slightly parted, but it seemed like she was resisting the urge to react in any way. Yet the faint trembling I felt with my fingers told me I was hitting the right spots.

Marie had been watching us intently until she noticed the change in

Wridra. That was when she grinned mischievously.

“You’ve gotten awfully quiet and look like you’re enjoying this,” she said. “How cute. You remind me of how you are in your cat form. It makes me want to pat your head right now. Come here.” Marie then placed Wridra’s head on her lap.

Shirley must have found the sight of the Arkdragon having her hair stroked by Marie while getting a massage strange, since she blinked her sky-blue eyes. The fastest way to understand what was going on would have been for her to haunt Wridra’s body, but she’d have turned into a puddle.

A gentle breeze blew in through the window, carrying the sound of the sea along with it. The smile on Wridra’s lips suggested she was actually enjoying how Marie and I stroked her.

“There’s a custom to reward those who work hard in this country. I know you’re not finished with your renovations, but sometimes I want to spoil our Lady Arkdragon,” I said.

“Agreed,” Marie said. “It’s thanks to you that we were able to enjoy the beautiful Izu morning. Thank you for being so considerate earlier, Miss Kindhearted Arkdragon.”

“Fools,” Wridra said, but she rolled over and buried her face in Marie’s thighs. She really was like a spoiled kitten. The only issue was, when she moved around like that in her yukata...

Suddenly, my eyes widened in shock. It looked like this woman wasn’t wearing any underwear. I knew she always complained about how uncomfortable it was, but she couldn’t be this careless... Could she?

I secretly repositioned her clothes to cover her up like I had done in the dream world. I couldn’t expect the Arkdragon to learn modesty, but I at least hoped she’d learn some common sense.

The room was soon filled with the sound of Wridra breathing comfortably in her sleep. Marie and I met each other’s eyes, then tried not to make any noise as we laughed. It turned out that the final boss was hilariously easy to take down.

It was still way before the time most people woke up, and we had plenty of time before checkout, so we decided to let her sleep for now. Marie, who still stifled her giggles, helped me put a comforter over Wridra.

Soon after, the sound of a sliding door being softly shut was heard.

Chapter of Midsummer, Episode 17: Battle with Charybdis

I watched the sky brighten as I slowly walked along the shoreline. There weren't any people around, but I enjoyed the wild atmosphere out in nature. I felt a sense of satisfaction from traveling to a distant land and let out a contented sigh.

"That mugitoro was perfect for breakfast. It was nice and light, and it tasted so good with soy sauce," Marie said, walking alongside me. It seemed she didn't share my sentiment and was recalling our time at the inn.

I then noticed the bounce in her step and realized that she was savoring the trip after all. But unlike me, she seemed to have enjoyed our time in East Izu more than this place.

It was still dim outside, so we had to be careful not to trip, even if the fine sand on this beach wasn't much of a problem. I held Marie's hand before I knew it so I could support her even if she stumbled. Unlike earlier, my eyeline met hers now, but I was still far more athletic than she was.

The sea constantly ebbed and flowed, and strangely, I felt like I could sense the breath of the wild in those waves. I gazed out at the sea as I spoke.

"That was just the right amount of food, considering we had such a big dinner the night before. Barley rice is a popular health food, but it's usually ground into flour in this world."

Barley was a versatile crop that had been grown in Japan for a long time. It was also highly efficient, as it could be planted as a second crop to rest the fields. It was a healthy crop as I had just mentioned, but strangely, the practice of cooking it wasn't very widespread. Instead, it was far more common for it to be ground and dried.

"The reason being, it tastes bad," I added.

"What? I thought it was plain but still good," Marie said.

"Yeah, it can taste good through selective breeding. You can bring out its true flavor by steaming or cooking it, but that also emphasizes its

unpleasant smell."

When you considered that, it was far more convenient to use it in bread. In Japan, you had readily available rice, which didn't smell bad and could easily be prepared by cooking it, so most people preferred it over bread. Each region had its preferred cooking method.

"I've actually tried it in a foreign country before, but I regretted it. That day, I learned that I shouldn't always let my curiosity drive my actions," I said.

Marie must have pictured me making a disgusted face, as her laughter rang through the deserted coast after a brief pause. The distant sound of flapping wings led me to believe that a bird had been startled by the sudden noise. I looked around, but I couldn't see where it had come from.

Instead, I found a spot of light. It was someone's fire at the corner of the beach, smoke faintly billowing from it and wavering in the wind.

"That must be Eve. I hope we didn't make them wait too long," I said.

"It should be fine," Marie replied. "It's far better here than sleeping in the ancient labyrinth, and the Arkdragon watched over them."

I told her she was right and glanced toward the coastline, where I spotted a giant creature in the distance. A giant Arkdragon was slumbering with her wings folded, and beneath it was Charybdis in the same state as when we had parted with the others.

The dragon, darker than the blackness of night, noticed us and slowly raised its head. It then spread its wings in a leisurely manner, let out a dull cry, and flew into the air. Charybdis had fulfilled its role as footing but didn't seem to awaken yet. It remained completely motionless as if it were pretending to be an island until its natural predator was gone for sure.

We certainly didn't consider Charybdis a worthy opponent, but I wanted to figure out a way to defeat it with Marie.

The woman who had been standing in the distance turned toward us. It was too dark to tell for sure, but judging by the length of her hair, it must have been Eve. The darkness didn't hinder her vision one bit because, well, she was a ninja.

"Good morning! Looks like the weather's gonna be nice today," Eve said cheerfully.

The monster had had its way with her yesterday, but it seemed she had completely shrugged it off already. Maybe Doula's scary outburst had

helped in some way.

“Good morning, Eve. You didn’t sleep much, did you?” I asked.

“It’s fine! Being on watch doesn’t bother an expert ninja like me. I’m actually happy to be of service. I just hope everyone got some rest instead.”

Eve spread her arms wide, and it really didn’t seem like she was exhausted. She quickened her steps and approached us, finally coming close enough for us to see her smiling face. Then, her expression suddenly darkened.

“Man, I messed up big time yesterday. I was really shaken by what that monster did to me, ya know? I’m just glad you’re a kid. I would’ve died of embarrassment otherwise,” she said.

Her smile returned, but then a realization hit her. I might have looked like a child, but I was actually a full-grown, working adult. Eve’s face remained smiling but grew pinker, and her shoulders began to tremble. Even though I said nothing, she crouched down and hid her face with her hands.

“That’s right, you’re an adult! Ahh, I wanna die!”

Her despairing cry startled me, so Marie stared at me and asked, “What does she mean?” But there was no way I could explain.

Still, I understood why she was embarrassed about getting attacked by that crude monster, since we had all witnessed the whole thing. The situation didn’t seem as bad when she assumed we were kids, but the mental damage was now hitting her all at once.

“N-Now now, everyone makes mistakes... I’ve been swallowed whole by a frog-like thing before. Oh, and I’ve ended up completely naked after getting my clothes torn up too,” I said, trying to make her feel better in a fluster.

It was best to act as if nothing indecent had happened. After all, there was no way *that kind* of monster existed. Charybdis was just weird.

While all this was going on, the Arkdragon flapped her wings in the predawn sky. After letting out a loud roar, she then flew away somewhere. I felt as if the dragon was telling us to take it from here.

We then noticed that the monster was starting to move again now that the danger was gone. Its giant tentacles shifted around as if it were doing its morning stretches. We heard a deep rumbling, then it began making its way toward the beach again.

“Looks like it’s ready for round two. That thing’s persistent,” I noted.

Eve blinked the tears out of her eyes and stood up. Her face was still red from shame, but as a member of Team Diamond, it was in the face of adversity that her true talent shined. Sensing the upcoming battle in the air, she flicked her nose with a thumb and exhaled.

“Bring it on. We’ll see who wins this time.”

Eve glared at the giant monster and made a sleeve-rolling gesture, even though she was wearing nothing but a bikini. The other fighters, who were also used to fighting beasts like the one before us, awakened at once.

“Prepare for battle, everyone! Oh, the sleepyhead crew is back,” Doula said, her eyes already in battle mode. Behind her, the brawny warriors Zera and Gaston picked up their swords. Everyone was ready to go, but it seemed Doula had thought of something.

“That means we can retreat using Wridra’s power if we choose to.”

“What? Hell no! There’s no way I’m running from that thing!” Eve protested.

“Yes, of course we will take it down,” Doula replied. “I’m only saying that I don’t want to risk everyone’s lives for the sake of stubbornness.”

She stared at the faraway horizon as she spoke. There was serenity in her eyes, and it didn’t appear like she was as eager to fight as the others, likely because there was no clear path to victory yet. The opponent’s Indestructible was going to be extremely difficult to deal with, so the thought of retreating must have been quite appealing in her mind.

Marie, who had been silently observing until now, took a step forward from behind me. Seeing that the situation hadn’t changed from the roadblock we had faced yesterday, she cleared her throat and began to speak.

“I’d like to suggest something if you don’t mind. We’ve been thinking of a way to win this battle. It may not seem like we’ll gain much from this fight, but I think we’ll grow stronger as a result. So please hear me out.”

Marie had quite an intense drive to achieve victory. Come to think of it, the leader of the Sorcerer’s Guild in the Alexei region had trusted her enough to give her an assignment. She might look frail, but she was a skilled fighter who had slain countless monsters, giving plenty of weight to her words.

Doula nodded right away. Everyone formed a circle at the simple rest

area on the beach, eager to hear Marie's plan.

Waves crashed against the shore.

The sun shone brightly on the white beach, but the approaching abomination ruined what would have been a beautiful sightseeing experience. Yet no one had been able to defeat it. It was quite a lamentable situation for the residents here.

Maybe Marie felt the same way. Her brow was furrowed as she turned around, so I smiled at her in hopes of helping her relax a bit. After all the time we had spent together, I knew she performed best when she could enjoy herself a bit without being so tense. Imagination and ideas gained through inspiration were key for a Spirit Sorceress. My efforts were then rewarded with Marie returning a smile, her white hair swaying in the wind.

"Are you ready, Mr. Sleepyhead?" she asked.

"Sure am. I don't know why, but I'm excited about facing off against a giant monster. I actually appreciate the opportunity. But the more important question is whether *you're* ready," I replied.

"Oh?" she said, then smiled. She wielded her Arkdragon's staff, and despite her unassuming swimsuit costume, she truly was a force to be reckoned with. One after another, spirits emerged from the sea's surface as Marie giggled. There were so many I couldn't count them all if I tried, and I felt nothing but a chill when their many eyeballs looked at me all at once.

"Yeah, you're one heck of a Spirit Sorceress all right," I noted. "This reminds me of the shadow realm residents we battled against a long time ago. Do you remember them from back when we fought Shirley?"

"Of course. That was the inspiration for this spell. The ancient labyrinth has too many useful references, but I'm afraid I won't be able to use them all," Marie replied.

The girl I had once protected was now a skilled fighter in her own right, which made me feel a bit conflicted. After all, most men longed to be the protectors of delicate women.

Just then, another valiant woman made her appearance. I wasn't sure where she got it, but Eve was wearing a headband that had the kanji for "certain victory" written on it, and she slapped her cheeks with both hands. I almost asked her why she was dressed so ridiculously, but I stopped myself.

“You look like you’re raring to go,” I said instead. “Facing a titan like that gets you fired up too, huh?”

“Huh? I dunno what you’re talking about,” Eve replied. “But yeah, of course I’m ready to go. I plan on winning any fight I get into, and we’re supposed to lead the charge into the ancient labyrinth. We can’t just back down.”

I was disappointed Eve didn’t share my sentiment, but I had to laugh. Just having friends fight alongside you made it so much more fun. I probably felt this way because I traveled alone all the time. Eve and I worked very well together, and she could skillfully react to whatever I was doing without me saying anything out loud.

“So, do you get Marie’s plan?” I asked.

“Yup. Not so much of the confusing parts, but in a nutshell, we just gotta mess it up from the inside, right? It’s only invincible on the outside, not the inside.”

I wasn’t sure if she understood, but she was an intuitive type of person, so I felt like she could get away with making decisions on the fly. Overthinking things could end up affecting her negatively... Not that I thought she was stupid or anything.

“You just thought I was stupid, didn’t you?” Eve said.

“What? No!”

She gave me a look, and I felt sweat beading on my face. It seemed her intuition was so sharp, she could sense my slightest thoughts. So I extended my fist toward her; she knew exactly what the gesture meant. She smiled, then bumped my fist with her own.

“Let’s do this. We’ll beat that thing and have some good sake tonight,” she said.

“Right, just don’t do anything rash. Make sure you follow my orders, okay?” I replied.

Eve grinned like a friendly cat. Her amiable nature was one of the things that made her so likable. I had thought she would be a pain to deal with when we first met, but we had become close friends before we knew it. Our bond might have naturally grown from our shared experience of dying after Zarish stabbed us.

Suddenly, Doula’s spirited voice rang out. “Sleepy, Marie, Eve, everyone! Are you all ready to go?”

The three of us confirmed we were ready, and the others responded through Mind Link as well.

Charybdis's titanic body emerged from the sea with a massive eruption of water, signaling the start of the fight.

"Commence battle! Puseri, Kazuhiho, take the point and approach the target!"

We affirmed Doula's orders and went on the move. Puseri mounted her black steed, readied her giant spear, and dashed across the waves. Eve and I hopped on Roon, which began flapping its wings, then took to the skies.

Mariabelle waved at us as we flew off. She couldn't accompany us since we'd be flying at breakneck speeds, but the Spirit Sorceress had a much more critical role. Taking point might sound important, but we were basically the pawns in this operation.

We flew in an arc just above the sea surface, Roon's wingtips spraying water in our wake. The giant's body grew closer by the second, and we had to stay alert for any tentacles lurking beneath us. I had to admit that I didn't dislike tense situations like these. I licked my lips, then felt Eve tap my shoulder.

"So, how are we gonna be bait? We're just buzzing insects to that thing," she remarked.

That was a tough question to answer. I couldn't just tell her that being with me was enough since Charybdis loved girls in swimsuits for some reason, even if it sounded ridiculous. Eve was undoubtedly very attractive, as proven by the reaction from the other guys yesterday, so it was unlikely that we would be ignored. As I considered this, something was happening in the water.

"Tentacles incoming! I'll send you the visuals!" Marie's voice announced.

There it was, the thrill of a battle where you couldn't let your guard down for even a moment. As I had mentioned earlier, I didn't hate this feeling. Giant tentacles emerged from either side as if to sandwich us, but I tilted Roon sideways and accelerated forward. In that moment, I sure was glad Shirley had healed the Magic Stone to pristine condition, allowing me to experience the exhilaration of this moment.

"Whoa, whoa! Careful, you barely dodged those things!" Eve shouted.

"That reminds me," I said. "Remember when you said to fly till I make

you scream?"

"Um, I...guess? Maybe I did. What of it?" she asked.

"I don't plan on letting you off even when you do scream, so I just wanted to say sorry now," I replied.

Eve blinked, then I steered us directly upward. Our trajectory took us just above the tentacles, then we dropped right back down in free fall after reaching the apex. Tentacles pushed forward from the front and below us, and I heard Eve gulp audibly.

Don't blame me if you pee yourself.

As the mean thought crossed my mind, I swerved this way and that, zigzagging every which way at blinding speeds. I wasn't just piloting anymore. This was the moment for Marie's visuals and my abilities as a mobility specialist to shine.

"Isn't this fun, Charybdis?" I said. "I can see a bad end around every corner. We're about to find out which of us is more persistent. I think I can give you a run for your money, if I do say so myself."

I skimmed Roon's wingtip along a tentacle, dove, and sped forward just above the water. The massive creature filled my vision, and tentacles surrounded us. I couldn't help but laugh—not out of nervousness but out of defiance in the face of a challenge.

All of the tips of the tentacles spread open at once, revealing many wriggling things inside. Eve let out a squeak, then I sped us forward toward the cave-like opening ahead. I veered away just as we were close enough to smell the stench of its saliva, leaving my passenger as white as a sheet.

"That was a good one! What would you rate it out of a hundred, Eve?" I asked, turning to her. "I'd say it deserved at least an eighty."

"A-AAAHHHHHH!!!"

Eve was usually fearless, but she had finally reached her limit as she screamed and wrapped her arms around me from behind. Her uvula was fully exposed with her mouth wide open, and she repeatedly shouted "No" on the verge of tears, even though she'd stated she was ready to win not too long ago. She just had to hang in there for a little longer to seize victory, and I wanted to support her on our way there.

"Your screaming will be useful for drawing Charybdis's attention," I noted. "Puseri, now's your chance."

"You are clearly no ordinary child," Puseri replied. "But that much is

obvious, seeing how you led the elites of Team Amethyst."

I didn't have it in me to tell her I was actually an ordinary office worker. The compliment was flattering, of course, but the guilt I felt over making her team member scream like that was more significant right now. But it wasn't as if I was just messing around for fun.

A loud *thud* resounded from the other side of Charybdis. It was a powerful blow from Puseri, who boasted the greatest offensive capabilities of Team Diamond, that had landed a direct hit. I couldn't believe such an explosive force was just a physical strike. Not to mention, her black steed was supernaturally fast, and it had already galloped away by the time the titan's many eyes turned to look at its attacker.

"I forgot to mention, this isn't a fight. We're just toying with you. Just so you know, you're never going to catch me unless you have some sort of ace up your sleeve." It wasn't as if Charybdis could understand me, but trash-talking made things more exciting for me. This was enjoyable, even if I looked sleepy.

"Behind us! They're coming!" Eve screamed with her arms still wrapped around me.

I folded Roon's wings and dropped us straight down, the wind howling in our ears. We accelerated as we spiraled downward, then swerved horizontally along the water, avoiding the tentacles reaching for us.

"The tentacles are changing up their movement. Going by what happened last time, it should be preparing a ranged attack!" Marie warned.

"All right, time for the next step," I said.

The tentacles pointing at us all constricted at once. Sure, it was a scary sight, but it was as if a bunch of flies buzzing overhead suddenly got mad at you. I stopped us in midair to provoke the enemy further, then when they all fired a line of pressurized water at us, I maneuvered us out of the way.

I knew from experience how annoying this could be. Nothing was more frustrating than a mosquito that suddenly appeared when you were trying to sleep, but now that I was the one doing it, it was kind of fun. It was pretty funny seeing the tentacles slam the water angrily, but my passenger didn't seem to think so.

"Gyaaaaaa!!!"

Eve wrapped her arms around me, wailing at the top of her lungs. I felt awful for her and wanted to convince her that there was no way we would

get caught. Through Mind Link, I could hear everyone's worried comments like "Holy shit" and "Is Eve alive?" But I wished they had a bit more trust in me. Besides, Charybdis's focus on me meant it wouldn't notice the sound of hooves approaching from behind.

Thud! Boom!

The unbelievably heavy impacts from a spear rang out one after another. Puseri struck when the opportunity presented itself, then immediately retreated. Even with countless jets of pressurized water shooting at her, she rode off with none coming close to hitting their mark.

The enemy's Indestructible skill was still in full effect, and even Puseri wasn't able to leave a dent. We had basically been dealing zero damage this entire time, with no end to the battle in sight. A single mistake could cost us gravely. As I considered this dire situation, Wridra's familiar voice spoke in my mind.

"Hah, hah, it appears you are enjoying yourself. I suspect you are glad to have acquired the ability to quickly act in the span of a second with Acceleration."

"Wridra!" I said. "You can say that again. It's thanks to this ability that I'm able to mess with this ancient beast."

As a mobility specialist, the skills I had made it easy to retreat from enemies. Overload, which I had developed in my fight with the hero candidate, and Acceleration, which I had learned by training under the Arkdragon, were unparalleled. Monsters' attacks were easy to avoid in terms of timing and direction since I could automatically evade them after seeing them just once. I honestly couldn't imagine any way I'd lose against Charybdis, though I didn't believe I could win either.

Suddenly, I heard Marie's confident voice in my head.

“You can say it’s thanks to you that I came up with this plan, Wridra.”

“Oh? I did not think I had given you much of a hint,” the Arkdragon replied.

“It only makes sense. If Indestructible really made Charybdis invincible, it would have had no reason to fear the Arkdragon. Since it was trying so hard not to get noticed, there must be some sort of hole in its defense...one that should be fairly obvious too.”

She had a point. If its weakness wasn’t obvious, Charybdis wouldn’t have acted so afraid yesterday. And this went without saying, but no one in the world would slay that beast if nothing could hurt it. Indestructible had a glaring weakness, and this battle had become all about figuring out what it was.

“Hey, let’s focus on the monster here, yeah?” Eve interrupted. “Look, all those tentacles are pointing right at us! Please, say something!”

Sorry, Eve, but can you give me a minute here? I thought. We needed a plan to win this, and frankly, I didn’t really want to face that creeper of a monster head-on. I hoped she understood.

“Hah, hah, you’re trying to strategize against an ancient beast like it’s a game,” Wridra said. “Look, this should be even more exciting with an audience.”

I looked around as suggested and saw several figures gathering at the beach. The audience she spoke of seemed to be the villagers of this island, wearing aged clothes. The wind carried their voices here, and I could faintly hear them cheering us on. They had more at stake here compared to the rest of us who were just here on vacation.

“We’re representing Arilai here, so we can’t afford to lose. Are you ready, Marie?” I asked.

“I’m ready,” she replied. “It’s times like this that I’m really glad I’ve learned to control many spirits at once.”

Just like our battle with Kartina, Marie had been using quantity over quality to overwhelm the opponent with a mass of spirits at once. But this time, she was the main part of this operation instead of playing a support role. With an overview of the field from above, I saw Marie was ready to engage. A mass of translucent, jellyfish-like things drifted all around Charybdis. Anyone with trypophobia might have been creeped out by the sight. The spirits that had made shaved ice yesterday were now helping us

take down this monstrosity, so it must have been a busy vacation for them too.

“This has been a huge hassle, but the tides should be turning soon. When it does, your fight that’s been going on since ancient times will finally come to an end. Let’s say all that water in your body runs out... What do you think will happen then?” I said.

The monster’s side, which was shaped like a fish’s gill and appeared to be for taking in seawater, opened wide. I wondered if this dunce of a monster would notice the massive number of spirits in that seawater or that several of them were red like blood.

In Arilai, it was said that the blood of the prestigious Thousand House was alive and had awakened through generations of brutal combat. Charybdis was about to get a taste of that blood.

“Doula, it took the bait,” I reported.

“We will now proceed to phase two of the operation. All units stand by for orders. Sleepy, don’t forget to prepare your Astroblade,” Doula said.

It was then that I remembered I had a job to do other than fly around as a distraction. Ideally, the fight would be over before I needed to step in, but it never hurt to be prepared.

And so, I charged energy into my Astroblade while evading the incoming tentacles. Puseri, the other distraction unit, was still patrolling the area without letting her guard down. There was an intensity to her reinsmanship, but it seemed there was a reason for that.

“I absolutely will *not* suffer the same humiliation Eve did!” she shouted.

Eve grumbled, but I couldn’t blame Puseri. It would be devastating if she got caught by those tentacles when we were so close to the finish line. It could even affect her dignity as a master.

It had taken two whole days, but the end of the battle was in sight. If you asked me what every fight with a giant monster needed, I would answer... Well, Doula was about to say it for me.

“Now! Detonate!”

At Doula’s command, stifled rumbling resounded from inside Charybdis. The countless spirits had frozen the water inside the monster, causing it to expand all at once. The titanic creature expanded even further.

Any opponent would be in trouble if a huge amount of air was pumped into them after taking in as much air as they could. Suddenly, Zera’s spirit

cry rang out across the sea.

"Here's a taste of my bloodline's secret arts. Thousand Burst!!!"

The moment Zera clenched his fist, a mass of bloodred blades ruptured the monster's body. The scary part of this ability was that it used the opponent's blood as a catalyst to cause even more destruction. After seeking the blood of more and more powerful warriors for generations, his house had built up this power in a way that resembled the process of a chemical reaction. This was why it was said that no man could match their prowess, including how they had achieved endless feats on the battlefield.

At that point, one thing was for sure: just as we had suspected, Indestructible didn't protect Charybdis's interior. We had definitely inflicted damage on the creature. The gargantuan mass tilted over and landed on the seafloor with a ground-shaking impact.

Yet it seemed we hadn't successfully slain the beast. It slowly rose to regain its balance, and our commander ordered, "Second team, deploy!" It was time for Eve and me to make our move.

No, there was one more person I hadn't mentioned: a stalwart swordsman over level 100 who sought a worthy battle to die in. Gaston deftly kicked off of a tentacle to leap into the air. He readied his sword at waist level, then looked up at me for some reason.

"Let me thank you for showing me somethin' interesting, kid. If you like what you see, I can teach you how to do it," he called out.

He wasn't talking about the girls in swimsuits, was he? *Was he?*

I watched him curiously, then leaned over Roon's edge to stare in amazement. His blade split into about ten copies that flew toward the monster. Charybdis's Indestructible might have been rendered null by the many holes in its body, but I was amazed by how the projectile blades sliced through the tree-trunk-sized tentacles and left a gaping hole near its base. For a moment, I wondered if he was a character from a manga or something.

"I'd love to learn how to do that," I said. "All right, now let's end this."

I made Roon accelerate as we flew just above the water's surface and readied my Astroblade in a wide stance. It emitted a high-pitched whirring sound as I aimed the sword right at the giant hole in Charybdis. It felt like the sword was about to drain every ounce of energy in me, but it was almost time to eat anyway.

I endured the explosive impact that nearly blew my arms off as I released the meteoric projectile into the target's cave-like mouth. It exploded repeatedly inside the creature's body, inflicting damage throughout its pierced interior until...

Boom, bang! BOOOOOOM!!!

An explosion erupted in a pillar that seemed high enough to engulf the clouds. After everyone gawked at the cinematic spectacle for a moment, joyous cheering followed. The thing was, Eve, Gaston, and I were still being blown into the air. I sure was glad Marie hadn't accompanied us. After all, vanguard units were basically disposable pawns.

And so, the ancient beast Charybdis was reduced to dust.

The defeat of the monster that had terrorized the region marked a brighter future for the fishing village. By sundown, instrumental music echoed on the beach.

I still couldn't believe such a nuisance could exist. One thing was for sure: I wasn't going to tell the villagers what kind of creepy monster Charybdis was, because they would only be as disappointed as me.

§

A woman adorned with many ornaments played her string instrument.

She played a unique, foreign-sounding melody that two girls, who seemed to be her daughters, sang along to, creating pleasant music as the sun went down.

Their song was deep and sounded like it came from a bygone era. Perhaps it was the ordeal of the beast they had finally overcome, but something about their clear voices touched on the listener's emotions. Local drinks were served, and the villagers smiled fondly as they listened to the nostalgic songs of their people.

This place had a tradition of entertaining sightseers, and so they enjoyed music that evoked feelings of happiness. The beautiful tune remained unchanged even after the attack had devastated the beach.

Charybdis's mountainous corpse could be seen on the horizon, and the people could be heard laughing and toasting to its demise. It was long after these events that I would hear that this was the beginning of an annual festival where the villagers gathered at the beach and celebrated. They

would sing, dance, and look up at the evening star to give thanks for peace.

The villagers drank, listened to music, and poured out words of appreciation for the party that had slain their enemy. Marie, too, enjoyed the music with a dreamy expression, taking in the hospitality that differed from that of Izu. She then snapped out of her reverie and carried her plate to a table for some food. The villagers even provided the tableware, feast, and everything used in the celebrations without being asked.

As a bonfire was lit, the music became more cheerful. This was also for entertaining guests, but this night was filled with the villagers' overwhelming joy. Now that the beast would no longer haunt them, they kept expressing their gratitude with unending smiles and thanks. According to the villagers, the government had sent several thousand fighters to take down Charybdis, and the battle had raged on for over seventy-seven days. Although there hadn't been many casualties, their land had been desolated by the long conflict, which made morale fizzle out after being unable to inflict any damage on their foe. They had eventually retreated, leaving the government with a sizable debt, and Charybdis had enjoyed some quiet time in the tropical country.

The conversations were mostly about the battle with the monster, but many of them also admired the foreign beauties. They decorated the women's swimsuits and outerwear with numerous flowers and showered them with compliments on their unforgettable charm. The women didn't seem bothered by it; despite being troubled by it at first, they eventually smiled and happily accepted the compliments.

I watched the peaceful scene, but the apron I wore meant I was no hero tonight, just a mere cook. One thing was for sure: I didn't want to leave the cooking of the food I had brought from Japan to someone else. There were far too many ingredients and far too many people to cook for, so I couldn't be drinking either.

I was surrounded by a simmering pot, a bubbling bamboo rice container, and a mountain of foodstuffs that had been offered to us. According to Marie, I looked very lively despite being extremely busy.

"Yes, please take care of that fish for me! Marie, can you watch that pot for me? Make sure it doesn't boil over. Okay, everyone, please bring your plates!" I called out.

The locals and I hustled in the simple cooking area that could hardly be

called a kitchen. There was something wrapped in a leaf being steamed near the fire, and the scent of cooked fruit began wafting through the beach. Someone else was cooking with oil a few paces away, and the aroma coming from there was equally appetizing.

My head was spinning from the hectic work we had been doing, but the seasonings I had brought from Japan were a huge help. Just grinding some of it onto a dish enhanced the flavor, and when mixed into the food, it emitted a spicy scent that tantalized the senses.

Drawn by the smell, Marie turned in my direction. She sniffed the air, then looked at me with those beautiful purple eyes.

"I knew it. You're making curry," she said. "I could tell by the ingredients you brought."

"It's a classic when it comes to cooking outdoors. Easy to make, delicious, and everyone eats till the pot's empty," I said. "Oh, the rice should be ready now. Can you have someone help you get it off the fire? Ah, Zera! Good timing. Please pour some curry for the people who brought their plates over. We'll run out unless you portion it out, so be careful."

"You serious? I can hardly walk straight after losing so much blood," Zera replied. "And this smell's got me starving. Do you mind if I eat first? It's cool, right?"

I glared at him with a smile as if to say, "Of course I mind." Though it seemed my expression was more intense than I intended.

Zera, who was significantly bigger than me, just drew his mouth into a tight line and said, "R-Right." He then grumbled, "Why is he so stubborn when it comes to food?" But I pretended not to hear him because I only cared about the food.

As I walked around the beach and observed the site, I noticed Eve waving at me.

"Hey, the hot plate's ready to go!" she shouted.

"Thanks, Eve. We're good here, so you can go ahead and eat with the others," I replied.

Eve wore a brightly colored hoodie now that the sun was going down. She, too, was adorned with many celebratory flowers, making her look like someone's bride. At least here, it didn't look like she would be looked down upon for being a dark elf.

She seemed to be enjoying herself and didn't realize that she had caused

a miracle here. Hypothetically, if another dark elf ever visited this land, they would likely make happy memories here without being chased away. She had fought hard to regain her honor and had changed the future in a small way.

I remembered something as Eve waved and turned to leave, and I called after her.

"Oh, you probably shouldn't drink too much tonight. They're showing us a lot of hospitality, and I think you're pretty too, so it would be best not to ruin your image until the end."

Maybe she wasn't used to being called pretty since her well-tanned skin quickly turned pink. She looked around as if she were not sure what to say, so I asked if she understood what I'd said. But her face turned a brighter shade of pink until she finally called me an idiot and walked away.

I ended up making her upset, but I had to say something because that night in Izu was chaotic. Maybe this was none of my business, but I felt women shouldn't drink more than they could handle.

It was time to bring out another outdoor cooking classic. I drizzled some oil on a heated iron plate, then tossed some curly, untangled noodles I had already washed into the oil. Then, I cooked them until the bottom became crispy and flipped them over. I poured some sauce on top, which filled the air with a tangy aroma. The last addition was some meat and vegetables—the way I always made this dish.

"Ooh, that yakisoba smells good!" Marie said. "The one we had with Wridra and Shirley when we watched the fireworks was so tasty. Where did they go, by the way? I thought they would be the first ones to grab a plate."

Having been so focused on cooking, I didn't even realize they were missing until she mentioned it. I looked to the side and noticed Marie leaning in, watching me with her long ears swaying. There were flowers all over her hair and clothes, making her look even more like a fairy than usual.

"You've gotta have yakisoba when you're at the beach. I don't know why, but I feel like it's a waste if you don't," I said.

"I agree," Marie said. The light from the fire danced on her face as she smiled warmly. Her eyes shone like the starry skies, full of deep intellect and love. She was so beautiful; I let out a soft sigh so she wouldn't hear.

She then held out the wooden plate she had been holding up to her chest

as if she wanted some yakisoba. But it wasn't that she was telling me to hurry up. She held my gaze with a gentle smile, and her lightly colored lips seemed redder than usual from the firelight. I suddenly realized I had been captivated by her eyes and snapped out of it before accepting her plate.

Even though I knew she was cute, I couldn't help but be stunned by her eyes when we were alone like this. I was just a cook tonight, so I had a duty to make her dish as delicious as possible.

"Here you go. I didn't overseason it, so you should be able to enjoy the natural flavor of the yakisoba... Hm? What's wrong?"

For some reason, Marie wasn't accepting my plate as she had her hands behind her back. Then her smile widened, and I was bewildered to find her cheeks looked a bit red. I blinked, puzzled, until she took a step closer and unexpectedly placed her fingers on my waist instead of the plate. When nothing but her smile filled my vision, I felt something squishy press against me. I couldn't move or breathe. The sensation of her soft lips as she touched mine nearly made me drop the plate that was in my hand.

With both hands holding the food and no place to run, the kiss had taken me fully by surprise. When she moved away, the scent of flowers remained in the air.

Mariabelle let out a warm sigh, then opened her pale-purple eyes.

"Let's ask someone else to hand out the food and take a walk," she suggested. "Doesn't the delicious smell and atmosphere remind you of festivals in Izu? It would be a waste if all you did tonight was cook."

With that, I put everything down and she reached out to my free hand. I stood dumbfounded for a moment at the invitation from the beautiful girl adorned with flowers, then finally took her hand. Since when did it feel so natural and comforting to hold her hand like this? Traveling by myself was once my favorite thing, but I had changed so much since our encounter in her elven village and after she had woken up in Japan.

"I saw some interesting food over there. They were deep-frying some sort of fish," Marie pointed out.

"Oh, we need to check that out. There are all sorts of dishes where you deep-fry food with no batter. I wouldn't mind trading with them if they have some high-quality oil. We'd save some money on our food budget too," I said.

Marie giggled, and I felt an inexplicable sense of joy. I was a simple

man; just hearing her voice and laughter made me happy.

Suddenly, I remembered something: Puseri had held a meeting at her mansion, where Eve was captured. They then joined us for our vacation and battled against the giant beast too. But what had their meeting been about?

I figured I could just ask them later, so I squeezed Marie's hand again and began walking. Listening to the unique sounds of the folk instruments, we made our way toward the place where everyone else was gathered.

It was then that we heard loud cheering from the beach. I saw the crowd was praising how Charybdis's carcass had turned white like salt and crumbled away. Yet I felt like I had seen something like this before. Both the former floor master, Shirley, and her Monster Book had crossed my mind, but it was probably nothing. There was no way it could absorb that massive ancient creature. Rather than dwell on it, I enjoyed some foreign dishes to the sound of the villagers' applause.

Still, I was curious about why I hadn't seen Wridra. Where could she have gone without even leaving her black cat behind?

§

A strong gust of wind blew by.

The pale moon in the sky gleamed in Doula's eyes.

The night breeze was still chilly, even on the island of everlasting summer, so she rubbed her arms from over her jacket. She turned toward the faint sound of cheering in the distance, perhaps out of an instinctual desire for warmth. Seeing this gesture, the woman accompanying Doula spoke.

"You can go back if you wish. I wouldn't blame you after everything we went through today," Puseri said.

"No, I can't enjoy myself when there's something else on my mind. Besides, I don't want them to overhear our conversation and ruin the festivities," Doula replied.

Her expression and tone were rather grave for having successfully defeated the ancient beast, as if something far more terrible weighed heavily on her mind. She began walking again, her red hair dancing in the sea breeze. She walked as if there were no particular destination in mind, but she wanted to get away from the others.

The two women had already changed outfits. Despite the fun and liberating feeling of wearing a swimsuit, it was still embarrassing for a lady to expose her skin. Doula continued to keep her distance from the commotion, and Puseri soon followed.

Suddenly, Doula stopped in her tracks and spoke into the seemingly empty darkness.

"Wridra, you're free to listen if you're curious," she said.

"I did not think you were aware of my presence. It seems you are no longer one to be underestimated."

Puseri shivered at the response that came out of nowhere. Perhaps her pride had been hurt, seeing how she was taken aback by Doula's sudden comment and the abrupt appearance of the woman clad in a dress. Because of this, there was a bit of harshness in her voice when she spoke.

"How dare you eavesdrop on us! More importantly, how did you know Wridra was here, Doula?"

"Ha ha, it's simple. I may not be good with magic, but I figured she would follow us. I wasn't sure if she was there until she answered."

Wridra felt conflicted knowing she had been found out on instinct alone but didn't show it on her face. For some reason, she lost her expressiveness when separated from Kitase and Marie, which made her as mysterious as the moon above. The mystical dragon's gaze and faint smile made Puseri stiffen.

At that moment, the jeweled bracelet on Puseri's arm glowed.

The three of them didn't show any surprise, as if they knew it was coming. They each moved closer, staring at the bracelet and listening closely.

Certain items were given only to royalty and a few upper-class personnel like Puseri. They were Magic Tools, blessed with the power of the Land God to receive long-distance messages, used for relaying confidential information that pertained to the country. This was all out of necessity as an unprecedented crisis loomed over Arilai.

Under the starry sky, the two members of Team Diamond informed Wridra that a war had broken out with the country of Gedovar. Such rumors had been circulating for some time, and the military had even prepared for battle. Masters such as Puseri had undergone these preparations many times, so the confirmation wasn't much of a surprise.

Doula, on the other hand, clenched her fists until they turned white. Thoughts of a war involving humans, demons, and monsters centered around the ancient labyrinth plagued her mind. No one knew how this would end, but the commander looked up at the sky as if she understood the gravity of the catastrophe to come.

She exhaled slowly as the breeze carried her breath away.

— Chapter of Midsummer END —

Chapter of Betrayal, Episode 1: Autumn Skies and the Second Floor Pre-opening

Arilai was the scorching desert country while Gedovar was the land of demons...

Now that the war was official, the countries of Toshgard and Ninai joined and immediately strengthened their ally Arilai's faction. In terms of head count, the alliance's total forces greatly outnumbered the demon soldiers.

The citizens of Arilai were in an uproar. Gedovar had led a large army into their country, and the people were afraid the enemy would strike immediately with blitzkrieg tactics. They believed the enemy would opt to take their stronghold as quickly as possible since they were in unfamiliar territory. However, contrary to their expectations, the Gedovar army took the strongholds from the outer edges inward in a slow and strategic march.

Nevertheless, the royals had expected this. Every village the demons struck was already empty, and the supplies they had hoped to ransack had already been transported or burned down. This was mainly thanks to the spies within the country being unable to relay information due to the border restrictions.

Hakam, who led the ancient labyrinth raid team, and Aja had ordered the border restrictions, completely prohibiting people, resources, and even information from leaving the country. As a result, the intel the demons could obtain was from seventeen days ago and completely outdated. Hakam and Aja had efficiently mobilized the country and prepared for the enemy in that short period.

In spite of everything, like not being able to secure food, the demons didn't rush their invasion. After all, they were demons and needed some time to adapt to the scorching country. But the traces of monster blood running through their veins made them tougher, so they wouldn't dry up in the heat. They were biding their time before launching a full-scale attack,

and the royal family had also expected this.

Such were the reasons why Arilai had time before they were invaded in earnest, but the countries of the triple alliance were still far from being in sync with one another. In fact, this was a problem that time alone couldn't solve. Because Arilai had been developing the ancient technology of Magic Stones, other countries constantly tried to extract information from them. Yet Arilai kept defending their nation's secrets. Hakam believed this was the dark cloud hanging over this war.

It was only a matter of time before the two forces clashed. However, many people were still unaware of why the demons were invading in the first place—including the young man who traveled between modern Japan and the fantasy world.

§

Where is the border between autumn and summer? That is a question that may be answered by looking at the sunset. As the days grew shorter and the air grew chilly, we realized summer was behind us.

Spring was full of life, and summer was full of excitement. Once they passed, the world grew quiet. As the heat died down, animals and insects prepared for the winter, and humans felt as if they were left behind. That was autumn in a nutshell.

The elf from another world looked up while walking along the path in Koto City with a somber mood surrounding her.

She squeezed my hand tightly, but it didn't seem to be enough to negate the melancholy mood. She lifted my arm, got under it, and hugged me. My hand was left hanging, but she guided it to her waist on the other side, resulting in me holding her in an embrace.

"Not bad," she said. "It's warm, and it's a bit easier to walk with you supporting me. This is something we can only do in Japan since there's a height difference here."

She was a head shorter than me, so it didn't feel unnatural holding her by the waist. She had stuck her hand in the pocket opposite to her, and a brown knit cap with bear ears on it entered my view. But she wore it to conceal her long elven ears, even if it got in the way at the moment.

By a strange turn of events, my companion Mariabelle had appeared in

the real world from my dreams. And my boring life had changed drastically ever since that moment.

“It’s a bit harder to walk like this. Did you come up with it yourself?” I asked.

“Yes, maybe it’s not the best. I feel bad about it being uncomfortable for you, but I get to be warmer in exchange, so you’ll have to deal with it,” she said.

There was no reason for her to feel bad, really. I couldn’t be happier with her soft body hugging me tight, but I didn’t need to mention that. She knew full well that I was enjoying this, as evident by her lovely smile. That smile never failed to take my breath away, even after we had spent half a year together.

Her lustrous white hair shimmered as it swayed in the autumn breeze. There was nothing I loved more than touching that silky, soft hair of hers whenever we went to sleep together.

Passersby looked at her as if they had seen a fairy, which wasn’t too far from the truth. She had flawless skin, eyes like amethyst, and a comforting voice that enchanted whoever listened.

Yet she had been giving me love and affection all this time, and there was no way an ordinary office worker like me could resist her charms. I was head over heels as my gaze followed Marie at all times.

It was Sunday, and Marie had chosen to wear bright knitwear over a collared shirt and a chocolate-colored skirt. I wasn’t sure if she liked natural colors out of personal preference or if it was something elves liked... Maybe it was both.

We could hear the river trickling as we walked along the riverside path. The air felt colder here, which might have been why Marie had wrapped herself around me.

“It feels colder this year. The temperature has been dropping quickly since summer ended,” I noted.

“This is my first year in Japan, so I wouldn’t know. I’m sure we’ll be saying the same thing next year,” Marie replied.

It thrilled me to hear her clearly say she’d still be by my side next year. I wanted her to be with me forever, but I had a feeling she would make my wish come true without me saying it out loud.

Anyway, it sure was warm. The chill and melancholy feeling from

earlier had completely disappeared from walking around in such proximity to each other.

“A lot happened this summer, didn’t it?” Marie asked. “It might feel lonelier now that things are quieting down.”

“Summer always ends up being eventful. It was the first time I’ve been to a pool in a long time too. Come to think of it, things have been pretty hectic ever since you got here,” I replied.

Marie looked up at me from under the brim of her hat as if to ask what I meant. There was a spark of joy in her eye, and I felt she was thinking the same thing. The past six months or so must have been the liveliest her long elven life had been, changing her daily life to be even more enjoyable.

One of those changes included the fact that we were now officially dating. As a timid person, it had taken me a lot of courage to ask her to be my girlfriend. Fortunately, she had accepted, and we had been more intimate than ever.

As I looked back at our time together, Marie’s eyes drifted from me to the autumn sky. The color was beginning to fade and looked colder as evening approached.

“So, would you say there’s a sense of sadness to autumn in Japan? The Sorcerer’s Guild in the other world is rushing to gather firewood right about now. Once that’s done, they’ll need to stock up on preserved foods, so they don’t have any time to get sentimental,” Marie said.

“I’m not sure,” I mused. “Over here, they say autumn is all about sports, food, reading, and sleep... Though I guess I enjoy sleep no matter the time of year. I haven’t been as busy now that I’m an adult, and I think it’s a pretty comfortable season in general.”

When I was growing up in Aomori, this time of year was apple harvesting season. I was usually working part-time carrying mountains of heavy apples around. I had to work from morning to evening without rest even if it was rainy or windy, so it was a pretty tough job.

“People in Aomori are very serious when it comes to managing fruits,” I explained. “For example, apples don’t turn red unless they absorb sunlight, so they turn each one around to face the sun. They also place cushions under the apples so they don’t get damaged, and they refine the bags for covering apples over and over... Hm? What’s with that look?”

“I’m just dumbfounded by Japanese craftsmanship. I finally understand

why the difference between fruits here and the other world is like night and day," Marie said.

Her reasoning made sense, seeing how cultivation in the other world was mainly done by leaving fruits alone. It basically came down to the difference in the amount of love and effort put into them. I remembered complaining about how tough the work was back then and not wanting to eat apples for a while after being surrounded by their sweet scent for so long.

"Strangely enough, I long for apples when autumn comes around these days," I said.

"I miss Aomori," Marie said. "Fields and orchards as far as the eye can see, and there's a wonderful castle just a short car ride away. Nights there were so quiet and lovely too."

"Aomori would be better than the city for getting a feel for autumn. Oh, and there's still some time until winter, but taking a dip in hot springs with a view of snow, skiing, and New Year's Eve is going to be a lot of fun too. There's also the tradition of visiting shrines at the beginning of the New Year... Come to think of it, I guess there's always something going on in Japan," I said.

Much like autumn, winter could be a lonesome time of year, but there were many fun events during that time. Marie had a twinkle in her eye as if she couldn't wait to experience them. Maybe it was because she grew up in a forest, but Marie loved things that were trendy, which let her enjoy her time in Japan all the more. And thanks to her, I was rediscovering all the great things about Japan with each passing day.

"That's just how we elves are. Our ears perk up when we hear something that sounds fun, and we can't help but wonder what's going on. That's why there are so many elves like me who leave the forest even though we're not supposed to."

"What if I told a certain elf who loves festivities that she should look forward to winter in Aomori?" I asked.

After a moment's pause, Marie buried her face into my chest. I could feel her warmth as she nodded from that position. It tickled, but it made me forget all about the melancholy of autumn.

When she looked up again, her face looked even more cheerful than before.

“Hehe, that makes me so happy. Do you remember when your grandfather sent us apples? That sour-sweet scent always fascinated me. I can’t wait to find out what the end of the year in Japan is like,” she said.

“We should go then,” I replied. “He gave us money for travel expenses, and he’s always wanted me to see him at the end of the year. Now we can have a proper visit back home.”

As an office worker, I was extremely busy at the end and beginning of the year, so it was very difficult for me to go back home. I’d much rather get some rest, though I felt guilty about turning down requests to go visit. But the thought of spending the year-end holidays with my girlfriend in the country sounded like a lot of fun. I was sure she’d love spending time in a kotatsu, eating some mochi, and visiting shrines at the start of the New Year. I could just picture her wide-eyed wonder at seeing snow deep enough to get buried in.

Suddenly, something caught Marie’s attention. She quickly moved away from me, then gazed at the shade of a tree in the distance. A familiar young cat with tiger-striped fur appeared, let out a big yawn, and approached us.

“Oh, are you preparing for winter too?” Marie asked. “Look at you, all round and fluffy. Come here and let me feel you, you little fuzzball.”

The cat rolled over and raised its front paws as if to say, “No, don’t!” But it seemed to enjoy the attention. It then narrowed its eyes and let out a meow, making Marie smile widely.

Cats and dogs became puffier in the winter as they grew new fur. That might have been why the cat’s mouth hung open with pleasure as it let Marie scratch it to her heart’s content.

“Look at all this loose fur,” Marie pointed out.

“It’s growing longer fur to keep itself warm through the winter. Looks bigger overall too. Animals sure grow up quickly,” I replied.

The cat had turned into a puddle while getting scratches from Marie. It didn’t seem bothered when she touched its paws and even meowed for more. It seemed to have gotten even bigger since the last time we met in the spring, but it still loved getting attention and seemed to love getting its loose fur removed.

“It’s still a bit early, but why don’t we get you some clothes next weekend? It would be good to have things you can throw on for extra warmth, like scarves,” I suggested.

“But we just went shopping recently. You should stop being so overprotective. I’m much older than you, little Kazuhiho,” Marie replied.

She squished my nose with a finger, and I found the gesture adorable. It kind of tickled, but I couldn’t help but smile.

“It’ll still be warm during the day, but it’ll be chillier in the afternoon. It’s going to keep getting colder too. I think it would be a good idea to be ready with some warm clothes, Ms. Marie,” I countered.

“Oh, w-well... I guess you could be right. By the way, I kind of like it when you call me that. Can you do it again?”

The elf and cat stared at me in anticipation. I hadn’t had any idea she would be pleased by this, but she asked me again to say it, and I couldn’t refuse.

“Um... Ms. Marie, how are you always so mature?” I asked.

“Hehe, well, here’s the thing. You may not understand this, but when you get to my level, maturity just oozes from you without any effort on one’s part. You can just tell I’m a calm and collected woman by looking at me, can’t you?” she said, moving the cat’s paws in a cute gesture as she spoke. “If you want to look mature like me, the first thing you need to do is not be a picky eater. Like green bell peppers, for example. They may be bitter, but you need to endure it. You have to eat all your vegetables too.”

“But you still have trouble eating them,” I pointed out.

“Be quiet, Kazuhiho. You need to listen to your elders, okay? From today on, you can eat my share for me. Then you’ll be mature like me,” she said.

I made an “x” with my fingers to turn down that idea, and she frowned. I couldn’t let her be a picky eater after all.

That gave me an idea for tonight’s dinner. I couldn’t sit by and do nothing when there were some things she disliked eating. I wouldn’t impose raw fish on anyone because some people just couldn’t eat it, but vegetables and certain foods like green bell peppers were a necessary part of a healthy diet. If she was living with me, I had to make sure she was eating well.

And so, I began my preparations as soon as we got home. I cut a green bell pepper right in half as my pouting assistant, Marie, stood by my side. She clearly wasn’t happy about this, but tonight’s menu was already set. There was no escape for her, but the black cat kept her distance and let out a huge yawn while curled up on the bed.

The cat was actually the Arkdragon's familiar and acted as her eyes and ears in this world...but mainly her tongue. It seemed the cat wasn't interested in bell peppers either and slept with a view of the setting sun through the window.

"Don't make that face, Marie. I'll make it easier for you to eat," I said.

"Sure, I may not like bell peppers... You could even say I hate them. You didn't have to make me eat them whole like this!" she complained.

She looked like she was about to cry, but I had cut them in half and wasn't just feeding her the whole fruit. Plus, this was a popular dish; I wasn't doing this just to be mean.

Marie had taken off her beanie when we got home from our walk. Her long, droopy ears were a signature characteristic of elves, and she kept them hidden while in Japan. This particular elf hated bell peppers, and I wanted to make sure she got over her disdain for the little green fruits.

I scooped out the seeds from the sliced peppers, lined them up, and dusted them with flour. I then added finely chopped onions, panko crumbs, milk, and minced garlic to the bowl of ground beef we had prepared. Marie's purple eyes lit up when she saw the meat that was similar to hamburg steak.

"I might be imagining it, but this is starting to look good. Is this sauce okay, by the way?"

"Oh, yeah, that looks good. You're really good at seasoning dishes, Marie," I replied.

The bowl she was holding contained a mixture of soy sauce, mirin, and ketchup. Once the dish was cooked, we would simmer it for a little bit and use it as a sauce. After all, soy sauce complimented bell peppers and white rice perfectly. Marie looked mystified as I stuffed the bell peppers that had been sliced in half with the meat I had prepared. Her brow was furrowed in confusion. Yet she reached out with her hands and squished the meat into the pepper halves as instructed.

"Is this really happening...?" she muttered. "The tasty-looking meat is fusing with something I despise. The unbelievable part is, I'm helping you do it."

"Is that so? I'm hoping this will help you get over your hatred of bell peppers," I replied.

She shot me a glare as if to say, "That's impossible," and I brushed her

off with a nod. Seeing is believing, and there would be no convincing her until we completed the dish.

My mind wandered as we continued with the menial task of stuffing bell peppers with meat. It seemed this was the case for Marie too, as she opened her mouth to speak.

"So, what do you think is going to happen with the upcoming war?"

"Hmm... I'm not sure," I replied. "There haven't been any big battles yet, so we don't have a grasp of how strong each side is. If the war were taking place in this world, we'd at least know a bit from footage on TV."

But on the news, you had to deal with regulations and bias. For example, there were all sorts of regulations, like not being allowed to show a shooter and the person getting shot in the same frame.

When it came to bias, it was hard to pick up on it unless you were well-informed on the state of things both before and after the war started. But as long as you were aware of such details, it would be possible to gather a certain degree of information from TV. When I explained this, Marie turned toward the bed and asked, "Wridra, could you show us visuals of the war like the news?"

The black cat had been dozing off but jerked its head up at the sudden question. It then thought about it while swaying its head left and right, then meowed. We had spent so much time together that I could mostly understand what the cat was saying by the tone of voice. That meow probably meant it was possible to work something out.

"That's the Arkdragon for you," I said. "Come to think of it, that visualization magic Wridra was teaching you was lost in time, right? I wonder if she's going to use it with the familiar."

"Maybe... There are disadvantages to using a familiar, so I don't have one. Besides, I don't like the idea of having to take care of a pet. Oh, but I don't consider you a pet, Wridra," Marie said.

The familiar was definitely no ordinary cat. It didn't even defecate. The cat's tail whipped around and slapped the comforter as if to say, "Of course I'm not."

It occurred to me that Marie played with cats a lot, but she never said she wanted one as a pet. I wouldn't have agreed anyway, since I wouldn't be able to take care of a pet in my sleep. Curious, I asked Marie why she didn't want a pet, and she looked into my eyes before answering.

“Elves believe the concept of owning pets is against nature. My thinking is that if a bird escaped from a cage, it wouldn’t even know how to find and secure food. I can’t own pets because I would feel sorry for them knowing they wouldn’t be able to live without their owner.”

It made sense to me as it was an owner’s responsibility to take care of their pet, even if a cruel fate awaited abandoned animals. Thinking back to when I was living in the elven village, they didn’t even keep any livestock. It seemed they were conscious about caring for animals because they lived in such close proximity to them.

“When you put it that way, I get it. Have you been checking up on that cat so many times because you’re worried?” I asked.

“No, I just think that cat is adorable. Did you see how that furball smiles when you pet it? And how can you not love those big, round eyes?”

“Ah,” I said, feeling let down. I had thought she was worried about the cat out of the kindness of her heart.

It seemed to me that she was creating her boundaries just like she had personal rules to live by at home. She never left discarded clothes on the ground; Marie always made sure her shoes were neatly placed together and well taken care of—little things like that. Yet she never tried to force those rules upon me, and I figured she didn’t impose her views on owning pets on others because it was more of a personal lifestyle choice.

Marie’s face loosened into a smile, likely because she was thinking of the cat she had been playing with earlier. Her eyes then shot open as if snapping out of a dream.

“Right, we were talking about the war. Just to confirm, are we going to stay out of it?” she asked.

“I think it would be more accurate to say we *have to* stay out of it. We’re not from the involved countries, so I don’t think we’d be allowed to intervene. That’s probably why Great Aja was so insistent that we get citizenship in Arilai,” I replied.

Marie let out a sigh of relief.

After spending so much time in Arilai and making many friends there, it had become like a second home to her. Yet she was strongly opposed to participating in the war.

Not to mention, what if the Arkdragon ended up joining the war? I couldn’t even begin to imagine the consequences of such an event. I would

like to think that would never happen, but the future is full of unknowns. Meanwhile, the familiar of the Arkdragon in question was nodding off again, and I couldn't read its expression.

"I wouldn't mind joining the labyrinth raid instead," Marie said. "I feel like they should be more concerned with the war, though. Why wouldn't they just put off the labyrinth for later?"

"I've been wondering the same thing. Maybe the labyrinth is related to this battle somehow. Something tells me all the events leading up to now are all connected."

We finished stuffing the bell peppers, so I grabbed the tray and stood up from the table. The rice cooker beeped at the same time to let us know the rice was done, at which point I moved to the stove while Marie went to steam the rice.

"Yes, speaking of those events..." Marie said beside me. "We captured Zarish and massively reduced the scale of the labyrinth raid. There was also that S-Rank mission that we ended up turning down, and Gaston joined the squad."

"Don't forget the border restriction," I added. "I think it was around that time that talk of war really started picking up in Arilai."

"Oh, so that's why they narrowed down the number of soldiers being deployed! Hmm, that makes sense... They got intel from Zarish, then started preparing for war. They must have scaled down the raid team so they could transfer those troops to support the war effort. Which is why they prepared that S-Rank mission and left the raid to us... That must be it!" Marie said.

As we broke things down piece by piece, one question remained. It was just as Marie had mentioned earlier: Why didn't Arilai cancel the labyrinth raid?

Meat sizzled on the frying pan, filling the room with a delicious aroma. War wasn't exactly a pleasant topic, but our focus was on unraveling secrets. It felt like we had the clues we needed to solve this puzzle.

Marie's shoulder bumped into mine, and she quickly apologized. Her eyes then fell to the frying pan full of bell peppers; she winced, then returned to what she was doing.

She was already well versed in how to make miso soup and began cutting tofu and green onions with her practiced hands. There was something comforting about the sound of a kitchen knife rhythmically

tapping against the cutting board. Even as she worked, she was still focused on solving the mystery.

"Would you mind if I tell you my guess?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders, and Marie began to speak while putting the ingredients in the miso soup.

"I suspect the ancient labyrinth is linked to the reason that war broke out. There are rumors that the bandits we encountered came from Gedovar were present. What if the ancient labyrinth was the whole purpose behind the war?" she said.

"You know, I think we're basically on the same page there. So what could be in the labyrinth that's so deeply coveted? I've heard that in Gedovar, there are many demons that have monster blood in their veins," I replied.

The meat appeared to be heated all the way through, so I flipped the stuffed bell peppers over and put a lid on the pan. Now we just had to wait for the bell pepper part to be heated, then steam it.

"We should ask Kartina what's in the depths of the labyrinth. She's a demon herself with a strong sense of duty. Even if she doesn't tell us outright, her face will be like an open book," Marie suggested.

"Yeah, let's do that. She did say she's not going to leak anything, but I have a feeling she'll help us out." That was just a hunch, so I might be wrong.

Kartina was a survivor of the bandit group that had been sent in from Gedovar. She had gained great power when she wore the ancient armor known as Demon Arms, but the Arilai raid team had defeated her in the end. Yet she had been living on the second floor ever since Shirley had saved her. She said she wouldn't betray her home country, but she actually thought well of Shirley and Wridra. From what I could tell, I doubted she would do anything to hurt us.

Once the bell peppers were heated all the way through, I moved them over to a large plate. Finally, I simmered the sauce Marie had made earlier and brushed it on the stuffed peppers, and the dish was done. I hoped this would help Marie get over her hatred of bell peppers.

An appetizing scent now dominated the room, and the black cat was already sitting expectantly at the table. I placed the plate with a mountain of stuffed green bell peppers upon the table, meat side facing up, and the cat

meowed as if to say, “I want to eat already!”

“Looks like Wridra doesn’t mind bell peppers,” I noted.

“Who wouldn’t mind something so bitter?” Marie objected. “She’s just being considerate since you put the effort into cooking. Isn’t that right?”

The cat cocked its head, then pawed at me as if to say, “Just hurry up so I can eat.”

The ancient labyrinth was still full of mystery, but I would soon find out whether Marie would get over her bell pepper aversion.

As we said our pre-meal greeting together, Marie shot me a somewhat reproachful look. It seemed she wanted to complain about making bell peppers the main dish, but I didn’t say anything for now.

Stuffed bell pepper was an interesting dish because the ingredients balanced out each other’s negatives. It combined the husky texture of ground meat with the satisfying texture of bell peppers, which turned watery and bitter when cooked. When you combined them, you got juicy meat with a nice, firm consistency when you bit into it. Bell peppers were thick and fleshy, so they became even more succulent when they absorbed juices from the meat. Marie bit into it with a satisfying *crunch*, and her eyes widened at the depth of flavor enhanced by the hint of bitterness from the bell pepper.

She smiled, realizing that it tasted nothing like she had imagined. She hid her mouth with her fingers, and her pretty eyes met mine.

“This is so good! The texture, the juiciness...and the soy sauce complements it so well. Oh, rice would be a perfect pairing for this!”

Marie’s chopsticks clinked against her bowl as she shoveled rice into her mouth. The sauce, which contained soy sauce and ketchup, was a match made in heaven when added into rice. Her eyes lit up with joy as the mouthwatering flavor of the stuffed bell peppers, the sweetness of the rice, and the sauce blended together in perfect harmony.

“Mm-mmm!” she groaned, then glanced at me expectantly.

I instinctively thought...no, I *knew* what she wanted. I grabbed a can of beer from the fridge, and Marie nodded repeatedly. She clutched a glass in her hand as if to say, “Hurry, pour me a glass please! I can’t thank you right now because I’m busy chewing, but I need a drink!”

She swallowed her mouthful of food, then it was time for some ice-cold beer. She lifted her glass of golden liquid, then gulped it down and let out a

satisfied sigh.

“I love this! What a perfect pairing. You know, I think I like bell peppers just a bit now. I don’t like how this all went according to your plan, but I’ll forgive you since it’s so delicious.”

Marie picked up another piece of stuffed green bell pepper and observed it in a new light. She then opened her cute little mouth and took a bite.

The cat also seemed pleased by the dish and was busy munching away the whole time. It was eating off the small plate, looking rather pleased. But I only allowed it to eat because it was a familiar, and cat owners should not be feeding this dish to their pets.

“Looks like you don’t hate bell peppers anymore,” I noted.

“That’s not true,” Marie objected. “I just like stuffed bell peppers. You could even say I love them. But if they’re not stuffed with meat, that’s another story.”

Ah...

Come to think of it, she never complained about the finely chopped pieces of bell peppers I had put in fried rice. In fact, she said she liked the texture. It made me realize that getting over a taste you dislike is no easy task. I felt like a parent as I considered how I would expand her repertoire of dishes she liked.

After I finished taking a bath, I stepped out to find Marie quietly reading a book.

She sat in a chair in her pajamas, with the TV turned off so there would be no distractions. Seeing that she wanted to focus, I changed directions and walked toward the refrigerator.

I paused for a moment, then decided to make some coffee milk. As such, I picked up Marie’s favorite mug, the cute one with a picture of a dog sticking its tongue out.

I poured a cup of steaming coffee milk, then sat down next to Marie. She noticed the scent, looked up, and caught me off guard by giving me an appreciative kiss on my cheek. The surprising part was that it took me about ten seconds to even realize she had done it since it came so naturally to us by now. Marie inched closer to me as I touched my cheek.

“I’ve been reading that book you recommended, and this is my favorite part. The girl always wanted to live in peace after a long torment, but she quietly bared her fangs when her wrath was finally invoked. It’s so exciting!”

“Yeah, that’s the moment her feelings that had been welling up inside finally took shape. I don’t think you’ll be able to stop reading from there,” I replied.

The story was like a roller coaster that sped up near the end. The personalities of the characters, the environment they were put in, and the conflicts hanging over their world like dark clouds were carefully illustrated through many long pages.

The combination of the queen and devil gave the book a fantasy feel, which was right up Marie’s alley. But it was a world where deep, dark

desires were laid bare, so the recommended age for readers was rather high. There were some parts where everything seemed hopeless, but the protagonist somehow ended up finding a solution that struck at the heart of the matter like a sharp knife. They would cut and slash repeatedly, casting the dark cloud away...or so it seemed until the greatest challenge yet finally got revealed.

Such thrilling story developments were completely foreign to Marie. She gazed at the pages fervently, sweat forming in her palms as she carefully turned the pages one after another. I picked up a book too and slowly stepped foot into a world of my own.

The room was silent except for the sound of turning pages, sips taken from mugs, and yawns from a cat. There was a serene monotony in the air, but Marie's mind was boiling over like a simmering hot pot. It seemed she finally got to the big payoff where the protagonist resolved the conflict, and she let out a dreamy sigh.

"Ah... That was incredible. I want to be just like her," she said.

"Yeah, I've been waiting for a new volume to release for a long time," I replied.

"What!" Marie exclaimed in shock, then pursed her lips in displeasure. She appeared to be so taken by the protagonist's fervor and wanted to know what was going to happen next. "It's not fair. She did all that and they don't even show us what happens afterward. I'm not going to be able to stop thinking about it."

"Maybe that's for the better. Good stories like these don't always come out with a sequel. I always think about things like what happens next or whether a certain character ends up with the person they liked. Letting your imagination run wild like that is one way to enjoy it, but you can't help but wonder what really happens," I replied.

Marie giggled in agreement. It was nice to have someone who shared my hobbies and understood how I felt. After flashing a satisfied smile, Marie took my hand and whispered, "Let's go to bed now."

I hadn't realized how late it was already. It would still be considered early for most people, but it was way past our bedtime because...

At that moment, I remembered something important.

"Today is supposed to be the second floor's pre-opening, isn't it?" I asked.

“You’re right! I’m sorry, Wridra. That must be why you were meowing so much earlier! I thought you were just hungry,” Marie said.

Come to think of it, I had heard a lot of meowing while we were reading earlier.

The cat curled up on the bed and let out a sigh. It then plopped its tail on the comforter twice as if to say, “Hurry on over; it already started.”

As the familiar was implying, Marie and I had the ability to travel between Japan and the dream world when we slept. The time of day between the two worlds was directly opposite, so 10 p.m. was 10 a.m. in the other world, though it varied by region. The dream world differed completely from this one, as swords and magic were commonplace there. But we would have fun no matter which world we were in.

The so-called dream world wasn’t just a dream but another place entirely. In fact, Marie was originally a resident of that fantasy world, so it would be more accurate to say I had been inviting her here.

I lifted the comforter and slid under the silky smooth sheets. Marie was already waiting there, and she lifted her head so I could put my arm under it. And just like that, my arm had turned into her pillow.

There was a cozy, autumn-like atmosphere in the room, despite it only being lit by the downlight. Marie moved around to adjust her head position as she spoke to me.

“So this is why they say autumn is the reading season. I like it. It feels like I’m reading in a serene library, and the words just flow from the pages right into my head.”

“What should we do tonight, then?” I asked. “Should we pass on the picture books for now?”

Marie curled her lips into a smile, then whispered into my ear as if she had a secret to tell. My ear felt ticklish as I listened to her adorable request.

“Then I guess we’ll need Team Diamond to entertain themselves for a while,” I said.

“Yes, I’m sure they’re having enough fun without us, and it would be a waste not to take advantage of the reading season. Let’s see... This one’s next.”

Marie reached over and picked up a new picture book we had borrowed from the library.

For some reason, she had been doing a lot of sneak attacks on me lately.

As I focused on reaching for the book, I felt something squishy press against me. A floral scent filled my senses, and while my eyes widened with surprise, Marie stuck her tongue out in a cute and silly gesture. It seemed she was happy her little act of mischief had worked.

The elf girl who had come to my home was always full of surprises. She lay back down on my arm, and I couldn't say no when she urged me to hurry and read the book. I couldn't get enough of her sweet scent, and she felt amazingly soft to the touch when she inched closer to me. I didn't know how long I could focus on enjoying the reading season in this situation, but it seemed she had at least taken a liking to autumn.

As I flipped the pages and began to read the book, the cat that had been curled up between us let out a sigh of resignation. The Arkdragon was likely complaining about us on the other side.

§

It had all happened several days ago.

There was a place known as the manor of black roses, where a night straight out of a horror film took place. It was home to a group of elite fighters known as Team Diamond.

The team members were all beautiful women with distinctively colored eyes like precious stones that Zarish, the hero candidate, had recruited. An unusual sight was unfolding between them: the group's master, Puseri, and the dark elf Eve sat on the ground with their legs folded under them, looking rather uncomfortable.

Surrounding them were the women formerly referred to as "the collection." They had since been released from their lives of servitude and regained their true selves. Yet they were now each standing in a wide stance that somewhat lacked refinement.

It hadn't been long since Team Diamond had reformed, and they didn't place much importance on structural hierarchy. And so they were in the process of denouncing their suspicions against their master. Puseri and Eve had stayed somewhere overnight without letting the rest of the team know, judging by their cheerful attitudes upon their return. This absence had caused the others to become riled up in a torrent of suspicion, doubt, and jealousy. Having become the target of such emotions, Puseri raised her head

to speak, her twilight hair swaying from the movement.

"It...seems you are all misunderstanding what happened. You see, we received an important mission to slay a monster..."

A hand rose, cutting her off. It belonged to the tallest in the group, a barbarian with herculean strength. Her body was composed of thick muscles, and she only wore cow-patterned fabric that covered the important bits. She had a tiny waist that contrasted her muscular frame and her thighs were far bigger than those of anyone else present. The fabric covering her chest bulged out from her breasts, and the others wondered how she had such feminine charm despite her brawn.

"So, how do you explain those faint tan lines? It looks like whatever you wore covered little skin if you were out in the sun. Don't tell me you were walking around the desert in your underwear?"

"I certainly was not. It's called a swimsuit, and it's perfectly appropriate attire for playing at the beach—mgff!" Puseri said, getting cut off midsentence.

Eve, who sat next to her, covered her mouth in a hurry. Puseri had reflexively reacted to getting her sense of fashion questioned, but she had given away too much. Eve's blue eyes widened, and she slowly looked over at the others, but it was too late. Now that the words "beach" and "play" had slipped out, the cat was out of the bag.

"Wait, did you just say *beach*? As in the place with the blue, salty ocean? You two didn't just go out to play; that's a whole-ass vacation!" the barbarian woman exclaimed, then a blue-haired woman with curled horns moved closer.

The woman's name was Isuka, a magic swordswoman with demon blood running through her veins. She had fought on the front lines of their previous battle and was steadily gaining recognition within the alliance for her calm and collected swordsmanship.

"So, you two decided to leave us here and go to the beach. I won't get upset, so tell me. What sort of food did you have? Hm?"

"Really? You won't get mad?" Eve asked repeatedly, and Isuka nodded in response each time.

Eve already knew they had to apologize since it was true that they had gone out to play. Foolishly, she thought this was a good opportunity to

come clean without getting scolded.

“There’s this dish called curry, and it’s so delicious, I’ll never forget it. It’s spicy, but there’s also a hint of sweetness. When you eat it with rice... Heh heh, it was so good I scarfed down three bowls.”

As promised, Isuka didn’t get angry. Even when Eve flashed a peace sign at her, she only nodded and said, “I see.” However, the dark elf went pale when she saw the others glaring at her with their brows furrowed in anger.

When it came to grudges, those involving food were often at the top of the list. In fact, this was common knowledge in some countries. “Huh.” “Mm-hm.” “Is that right?” “Delicious, was it?” The voices around her said these phrases, full of resentment.

Puseri yanked off the hand covering her mouth and desperately tried to explain herself. The look on her face said she couldn’t just sit on a sinking ship without doing something about it.

“I-I only had one bowl!” she exclaimed. “I tore myself away from the food because I was thinking of all of you!”

“Wha... Puseri, how can you throw me under the bus when we swam with that float together?” Eve complained. “Were you lying when you kept talking about how good that liquor was? And when everyone was praising you and calling you pretty—mmf!”

It was all over. Not only did all of their secrets get exposed one after another, but they had taken turns confessing them of their own accord. Team Diamond was in the middle of putting their lives on the line for the labyrinth raid, so anger bubbled up inside them at this new revelation. Puseri and Eve embraced each other without thinking, sweat pouring down their faces.

This was the series of events that led to an impromptu vacation to put everyone at ease.

At the same time, the second-floor hall was being completed. When Wridra heard of what had happened, she offered the newly renovated second floor and said, “This would be the perfect opportunity to put this place’s comfort to the test.” Coming from the unidentified black-haired beauty, it was still unclear whether or not this would be a good thing.

Yet the team members had thrown a tantrum as they shouted, “I wanna go, I wanna go!”

They had been hearing rumors that the second floor had been completely reborn. It was supposed to be unbelievably beautiful, and some of the members were skeptical, while the others looked forward to the visit full of hopes and dreams.

And so, the second floor's pre-opening had begun.

§

The wind howled as a man looked up at the sky.

There wasn't a single cloud overhead, and the air felt as if it were on fire. A single gust was hot enough to remove all moisture and leave one's hair dry and brittle.

His hair, once red like flames, was faded and tied back behind his head. Although the years had carved deep wrinkles into his face, his presence pervaded the air like a freshly unsheathed blade.

Several plumes of black smoke could be seen rising straight into the sky behind him. The settlements there had been burned with dirty oil, meaning the land could never be inhabited again. There were few places people could live in the desert country already, and wherever the man led his demonic army, they would eventually be drowned in sand.

That was the purpose of this war. They would make sure this land could never be inhabited by humans again.

The man pursed his lips, and a horse approached him from behind. Strangely, there was no rider on its back, and it easily strode across the dunes in heavy armor that seemed more fitting for a dragon. The horse then opened its mouth wide, and its disfigured form revealed that it was actually some sort of demon.

"General Hyzoska Behemoth, we've received reports that the hundred and two members of the slaughter team have finished preparations. We've also finished our preparations to march into the scorching land."

The tall man listening to the report remained motionless in the sun. He wrapped a strip of black leather over a part of his face, took a deep breath, and exhaled. Sensing a familiar scent from long ago, he finally parted his dried lips.

"The guardian of old is finally gone. This is what he wished for...but to think he perished before we could execute our pincer attack. It's truly a

shame for it to end this way after he had lived for a thousand years."

The horse bowed his head, silent and unmoving.

The "guardian" he spoke of referred to a man who had fought the Arilai soldiers in the ancient labyrinth. He knew why the guardian had fallen. They had taken too long with the preparations to officially start the war, massively delaying their arrival as a result. The border restriction order had prevented their original plan from going into effect, which was to declare war. If they had executed their assault then, they would have been able to enter the country but wouldn't have been able to exit. It would have been a battle where retreat was not an option and where they couldn't restock on provisions.

Of course, they had already been aware that closing the borders was a possible option. However, they hadn't expected Arilai to take that option, given their greed and overblown sense of self-esteem. After all, restricting the borders came at a heavy price. Interference on the borders required offerings to the Land Gods on both sides, and so Hyzoska was impressed that the enemy was willing to do so without knowing for certain whether it would be worth it.

"Now the battle has officially begun, and the time to reclaim this land is now. Send that boy to the ancient labyrinth as planned. But before he arrives, it's time for the team lurking among them to make their move."

He had clearly confirmed that there were not just one but multiple traitors among the Arilai forces working for Gedovar.

Their plan to coordinate with the guardian and attack Arilai from both sides wouldn't come to fruition, but they had plenty of other strategies in store.

Hyzoska picked up the Magic Tool, then gave his order to strike the enemy from within their ranks.

§

Meanwhile, a woman leaned against a wall and took a bite out of a red fruit in the second-floor hall of the labyrinth. She had received it from a young boy named Kazuhiho and had assumed it would taste as absurd as the boy's name. But she was taken aback by its juicy freshness, texture, and clean aftertaste.

The fruit was supposedly called an apple. Sweet nectar flowed out with each bite, and her body demanded more when she swallowed. She already knew she wouldn't be able to stop eating from the moment she sank her teeth into its skin.

The freckled woman clad in white armor was known as Kartina. Her hair, a mixture of brown and black, was carelessly cropped around her shoulders, but the look strangely suited her.

She had once clashed with the Arilai troops in a fight to the death on the third floor and should have perished along with the armor known as Demon Arms. Yet she had ended up here, relaxing in the hall. If she had killed many soldiers during that battle, things might have been different for her. Yet Kartina had to admit that she found herself frustrated that she was thought of as being toothless.

She chewed her apple with an audible crunch. Strangely, she found the resentment in her fading away as she enjoyed its delicious sweetness.

"Well, I would have been fighting against Miss Wridra and Lady Shirley."

She didn't know it then, but experience had taught her she would have been no match for them. The verdant landscape she could see through the window was created by the former second floor master Shirley. She had circulated countless monster souls, and the area was so beautiful now that it was hard to believe it was part of the labyrinth. Moreover, it was mind-boggling just how mysterious Wridra was.

When Kartina had challenged her to a fight, Wridra had beaten her to a pulp with her bare hands. She was outraged about the result, but she wouldn't have been here eating an apple today if Wridra had fought her in earnest.

That boy who had given her the apple was quite a nuisance as well. She had boasted the advantage when they first started fighting but had found herself slowly getting cornered as time passed. His analytical ability was one thing, but he became highly versatile when he teamed up with that Spirit Sorceress elf.

When she considered the level difference between them, Kartina was certain she could beat him in a one-on-one fight, but she felt it wouldn't be that simple. She couldn't figure out why, but she couldn't imagine a scenario where she would have been victorious.

Kartina munched on her sour-sweet apple, looking up at the stone spiral staircase. The staircase connecting the first and second floors had ended up being surprisingly high before she knew it. There was also a separate route that led to the third floor entrance, so hardly anyone used the path she was on.

She had received the orders from her homeland of Gedovar, but she continued chewing her apple as if completely disinterested.

"I should have asked for more of these," she muttered to herself. "No, I shouldn't get greedy. I am a knight, after all... Or I should say, I *was* one."

Kartina should have been held captive in the underground labyrinth for all eternity, but she was saved by that kindhearted woman. She had been set free of those accursed chains and was given the option of living freely. Thus, she could only dismiss the orders from her homeland to betray her savior as ludicrous. Perhaps she would have complied to a degree if the order was to leak information, but she would have also ignored such a request if she was asked for vital intel.

As she mulled over such thoughts, she heard a noise coming from the spiral staircase. Judging by the reverberating voices, it was likely Team Diamond who had announced their visit in advance.

The mansion was about a kilometer away, so Kartina had offered to guide the first-time visitors. However, this was more of an errand for a servant than a step toward becoming a true knight.

Kartina tossed the apple core out of the window, and it flew away in an arc. She figured it would eventually decompose into the dirt, then wondered if something would grow from the seeds. But she shook that thought off and stood up straight, as a former knight should.

Eventually, the eight members of Team Diamond peeked in.

"Yo, Kartina. Yeesh, you always wear that armor? Aren't you hot?" Eve asked.

"Hm. If you ask me, I don't understand how you can walk around in that underwear. You should learn to have some shame. You haven't forgotten that this is the ancient labyrinth, have you?" Kartina asked.

"I-have-not-forgotten," Eve said dubiously.

Master Puseri appeared from behind Eve, and Kartina bowed her head politely.

"Thank you for coming, Miss Puseri and the members of Team

Diamond. My master, Lady Shirley, and Miss Wridra welcome you. Please, right this way."

"Thank you for having us. But there's no need for formalities with me. We're all raiding the ancient labyrinth together—" Puseri said, stopping herself. "My apologies. I've forgotten that you aren't doing that. You seem so capable that I've mistaken you for being part of the raid team. Still, I would like to treat you as a friend."

Puseri had her long, twilight-colored hair gracefully tied back, and her greeting was that of a classy young lady. Her presence was like that of a fearsome devil on the battlefield. But there was a dignity about her appearance that made it clear she had grown up in an upstanding household. Puseri's expression was dazzling to Kartina, who was more at home in battle.

"Let us get going; we can't wait much longer."

"Is it true that even monsters live peacefully in this land?"

Two girls poked their heads over from either side, and Puseri's expression softened as she gazed at them.

One was a plain-looking girl with brown pigtails, while the other was an adorable young girl with fluffy, pinkish hair. Both smiled at Puseri, then looked at their guide, Kartina.

"Now then, the second floor is this way," Kartina said.

She opened the door to the hall, and fresh air flooded in.

The cool breeze smelled of fresh greenery with a hint of sweetness. Light poured down on them from above, making the visitors feel as if they had stepped into another world.

There was no longer any remnant of the place where the woman known as the Undying King or the Reaper had once sat in solitude. Greenery grew lush and thick in the hallway, and the visitors stood agape as little birds flew overhead.

"You've gotta be kidding."

"Unbelievable."

"All this under a desert?"

Kartina felt joy in her heart at the audience's awed comments. She covered her mouth and secretly smiled with pride for her master. She then slowly walked along a well-maintained trail and began her tour.

"We plan on growing vegetables in the field over there, but it's not quite

ready yet. The soil here seems to root well, so crops should grow quite quickly."

They looked over to find bare soil with some vines extending from it on a gentle slope. The green crops were an unusual sight for the party, as they all crouched down to get a better look.

"As you can see, this place is managed by those lizardmen. I don't understand their language yet, but we offer lectures on reptilian monster languages at night. Please feel free to join if you're so inclined," Kartina explained.

Puseri looked up in a fluster. She hadn't noticed because he had been so still, but a large lizardman sat on a nearby stump and was sunbathing with his eyes closed.

"Lizardmen...? I hear they're vicious monsters. *They're* managing the fields?" Puseri asked.

"Yes, they're hard workers and surprisingly handy. The fish here are very tasty too," Kartina replied. "Ozo! We have guests!"

The snot bubble coming out of the lizardman's nose popped, and he snapped awake. He then turned toward the crowd and waved. His movements were sluggish and seemingly friendly with no indication that he even considered attacking them. The lizardmen worked for Wridra, yet Kartina opted not to mention this tidbit of information since they didn't want that to be known.

For the visitors, it might have felt like they were at some sort of theme park when they saw the fertile land and monster servants. The greenery appeared dazzling to their eyes after having spent so long living in the desert. After a short walk along the trail, they let out squeals of joy as they heard a running river and noticed it had clear water. It was quite rare for them to see water like that rather than it being sand colored.

Although there were monsters everywhere, they didn't seem to be evil at all. The visitors had no shortage of topics to discuss when surrounded by beautiful scenery. The women touched the trees, leaves, and flowers along the trails as they gazed upon the waterwheel that was still under construction. It was strange for them to see a crowd of lizardmen working on it, and the group wondered whether this was all a dream.

"I never thought I would see lizards managing a waterwheel. They must eat a lot being their size. Won't you run out of vegetables?"

“Ha ha, those vegetables become unbelievably delicious when cooked. The lizardmen know this, so they leave the crops alone. Since there are plenty of fish here and game to hunt in the forest, food won’t be an issue,” Kartina explained.

The seasonings that the sleepy-looking boy brought in, especially that black liquid, each smelled and tasted amazing. The vegetables soaked up the flavor, and even Kartina couldn’t help but eat them mindlessly. Recently, she had heard that there weren’t enough hands helping with food preparation, but unfortunately, Kartina didn’t know how to cook.

The group walked for a while longer and arrived at an open space with a learning section that had a roof over it.

Unlike the other areas, this area was landscaped in a perfect square. Kartina had seen the Wizard Aja teaching the secret arts to the elf Mariabelle as the raid supervisor Hakam instructed Doula’s team on battle tactics. She had also seen the aged Gaston and the big man Zera training the boy from time to time. When she had observed their training, Kartina was astonished by the old man’s strength and was unsure if she could defeat him in an all-out fight.

She had heard the members of Team Diamond accompanying her were some of Arilai’s most elite fighters. It was hard to imagine from the way they were cheerfully chitchatting, but she knew for certain that Puseri was a powerful warrior when rampaging across the battlefield on horseback.

What was I thinking, trying to take on this juggernaut of a coalition? Kartina thought to herself. If she ever faced them again, she would need at least three more Demon Arms on her side. Wridra and Shirley would have to be watching on the sidelines for her to stand a chance.

Thinking about it, Kartina suddenly found herself laughing. She had been told to backstab these people but wanted to reply, “Why don’t *you* try?” She knew that she was coming to love the second floor more with each passing day. Perhaps one day, she would come to think of it as home.

A realization hit her at the same time. As the women of Team Diamond were excitedly conversing with each other, Kartina noticed the blue-haired girl with the curled horns was a demon like herself.

“Want me to teach you how to speak Demonic?” she asked the tall barbarian-looking girl.

“Nah, not interested,” the girl replied. It seemed the blue-haired woman wasn’t even trying to hide her identity.

Kartina could sense that the girl holding Puseri’s hand had divine blood running through her veins. The woman with cat ears, who stared at the fish and slowly wagged her tail, likely wasn’t human either.

She thought for a moment, then remembered that the imprisoned hero candidate Zarish was supposed to betray Arilai with her. It was no wonder that there were some demons on his team. But hadn’t these women also received orders from above? Not that it concerned Kartina anymore.

“Oh well,” she said to herself. “Now, please follow me and watch your step as we cross the bridge.”

At last, the group arrived at the center of the hall. The path was now paved with stones and gravel, making it easy to walk on. They were preoccupied by the satisfying crunch with each step when the view suddenly changed dramatically.

The shorter trees that had been cropped and trimmed round were placed overlapping each other to cover the slope. Sunlight shone through the trees overhead, while the air was filled with a comfortable serenity. Puseri felt as if her heart were being cleansed with each step along the trail and looked around with awe.

“I never imagined a place like this in my wildest dreams,” she breathed.

“Yes, the garden design is very different from anything you would find in Arilai,” Kartina said. “Miss Wridra and Lady Shirley garden as a hobby and have been working on this place practically every day. I’ve become quite used to pruning myself. I may not seem like it, but I can fly, which can come in handy for this type of work.”

She laughed dryly, but it had been quite a trial for her as she had even cried from the plethora of complicated requests that were asked of her. Wridra and Shirley were surprisingly meticulous to the point they claimed it was not truly a garden unless it achieved harmony from all viewing angles, whatever that meant. It was no wonder Kartina had despaired from all of their unreasonable demands.

Where they got all their passion from was quite a mystery. Their instructions were extremely specific, as if they had seen their ideal garden firsthand. All she could do was follow their orders to the letter, and before she knew it, the beautiful landscape was complete. She still didn’t

understand how it had happened. As she was trying to figure it out, the group finally arrived at her master's residence.

At the same time, General Hyzoska tilted his head in confusion at the complete lack of response to his message. At first, he assumed the Magic Tool was malfunctioning. After all, he couldn't imagine that not one of his contacts responded to his order. With a tinge of sadness, the general ordered his troops to march forward.

He was about to start an intriguing war but felt his motivation fall just a bit.

§

The second-floor hall was in a complicated situation.

Although the country of Arilai had cleared it successfully, a young boy, who was a participant from a foreign country, had defeated the floor master. Not to mention, the second floor had become full of lush greenery due to the floor master who should have been sealed away.

Normally, disputes about who owned the labyrinth would have been unheard of. A labyrinth is a labyrinth, and it became useless once all treasures were claimed. However, a completely different type of treasure had been created: a land of abundant greenery that had suddenly and unexpectedly become the envy of the desert country.

The building at the center of the hall was another priceless treasure in their eyes. The floor made of soothing marble, the shockingly high ceiling, and the faint aroma that wafted through the space made visitors feel like they had stepped into a luxury Japanese inn.

The fields were in the process of being expanded and, judging by the taste and growth of their crops, their value was increasing with each passing day. Having experienced this firsthand, the supervisor of the labyrinth raid, Hakam, felt troubled.

"This place is far too comfortable. I've never heard of a labyrinth that's more relaxing than my own country," Hakam grumbled, then chuckled to himself. The aged dark-skinned warrior's muscular body was supported by leather upholstery.

There was a lobby immediately after entering the building, which was furnished with these comfortable sofas. A country to the far north created

such luxury leather goods, but they were extremely rare in this region.

“Hah, hah, of course. The place where guests are first greeted is where the most effort should be made. It speaks volumes of the owner’s capabilities, after all.”

The speaker, a beautiful black-haired woman sitting across from him, crossed her legs as she spoke. Wridra was dressed a bit lighter than her usual dress, clad in a collared shirt with a black vest over it. Her outfit had a sophisticated design and was moderately adorned with multiple ribbons.

Like the couch, it was a mystery how this woman had acquired such clothes in a place like this. Hakam crossed his arms and pondered for a moment, then opened his mouth to speak. There were far more important matters than furniture that needed to be discussed.

“As I was saying... The issue is that this once-useless floor has been completely reborn. The royals must be dying to get their greedy hands on it,” he said.

The second floor had turned into fertile land before anyone knew it. Under normal circumstances, this could have sparked a conflict over who owned the rights to it, but the country was in the middle of a war with the demon army that was invading from the north.

“So, this is all up to my discretion for now, since I’m in charge of the labyrinth,” Hakam said. “I’ll keep this quiet from the higher-ups because I don’t want to deal with them. If you allow us to use this place as a headquarters for the raid, we can call it mutual governance.”

Wridra’s brow twitched. There was no telling how the situation would change once the war ended. Hakam promised nothing would happen until then, but he knew this woman wouldn’t be satisfied with that.

Hakam leaned forward to discuss the main topic at hand.

“Listen. After staying here for a while, I know I won’t be able to govern this place. That floor master who had been sealed away...the one in the depths of the forest seems to be stabilizing this place, but I don’t even understand how it all works.”

Floor masters were completely different beings depending on the labyrinth, so they were incredibly difficult for humans to understand in the first place. Besides, the labyrinth still hadn’t been fully explored and the war would make it difficult. It wasn’t as if he could research this place and write a detailed report on it.

“That’s why I want to repeat what I told you before,” Hakam continued. “Finish exploring this labyrinth while the war is going on. Whoever can accomplish this will become a hero to Arilai. If anyone tries to confiscate this place, the public won’t view them kindly.”

In other words, he was telling her to accomplish something that would give them a just cause.

If this place were useful to the country and its people, even the royals would have difficulty using it as they pleased. His message boiled down to “If you want something, take it.” Wridra nodded. She had expected Hakam to say something like this and decided to try and find out more. She wanted to know what the country was desperately trying to cover up and what had triggered the war.

“Hah, hah, you speak as if you are not aware what lies in the depths of the labyrinth. Do you truly believe you can clear this place?” she asked.

“No labyrinth is impenetrable. We’re going to pull it off and save Arilai from peril, no matter who stands in our way,” Hakam replied.

The corner of Wridra’s lips naturally curled up at the dire look in the man’s eyes. It seemed he knew the true nature of this woeful labyrinth and set his resolve to continue fighting regardless.

She had already dismissed the idea that he was nothing more than a puny human.

Their level and strength might have been insignificant, but these people had the drive to continue fighting toward the light. They used various strategies to make up for their lack of power and eventually would pry open the door that was once impossible to break through. She must have come to think this way because she had been observing the human and elf for so long. They had reached out to her without fear and challenged enemies that were over level 100 head-on. Wridra found their straightforwardness so amusing that she couldn’t help but smile.

Just then, the other owner of the mansion arrived with a tray in hand. The woman with sky-blue eyes wearing a flower headdress bowed to Hakam, then exchanged his empty glass for a new one.

“Ah, thank you,” he said. “You’re the woman who joined Kazuhiho’s party, Shirley, correct? There was a floor master with the same name just before you joined. It was quite a struggle then; my men were dying one after another.”

Hakam chuckled, and Shirley cocked her head in confusion. She was the very floor master who had killed his men, but she looked as if she wasn't sure if she should apologize or stay quiet. Wridra, who understood the entire situation, desperately fought to hold in her laughter.

Suddenly, a bell rang, signaling that visitors had arrived. Wridra stood from the sofa, and there seemed to be a glimmer in her eye.

"I will accept your offer, of course," she said. "We will give access to the raid team. Let us start by welcoming these women, shall we?"

"Ah, they're here! I'll say my greetings as well," Hakam replied.

They looked toward the entrance and found the visitors standing there. It was quite humorous seeing Puseri, the daughter of a prestigious family, staring wide-eyed and flabbergasted at the spacious lobby. Her reaction, however, was understandable. The architectural style on display was vastly different from Arilai's and included a huge lobby that was simply inconceivable.

Soft sunlight shone through the windows. The building gave off its newly built status with comfortable-looking sofas and the smell of fresh wood. All of this clearly astonished the group.

The eight beauties then finally noticed the man in charge of the labyrinth raid, Hakam, waving at them, and their eyes widened even further. Puseri bowed her head in a fluster, and the others soon followed.

"We didn't realize you were here, sir!" she said.

"Ha ha, I heard you were all visiting, but I didn't expect you to show up in casual clothes without your armor. Now, I'm sure you ladies will be able to relax better without me here, so I'll be going back to work," Hakam replied.

He told them to rest well in a kind tone, then turned away. However, he had left some liquor for them as a gift, which they could have alongside their meal.

As Hakam was leaving, he remembered something and turned toward Wridra.

"Ah, our supply line will soon be cut off. If you need anything by then, list it up for me. No need for payment; it'll be courtesy of the royals."

In other words, the demon army would arrive at the ancient labyrinth before long. Despite the unsettling implications, Wridra replied, "Alcohol, tea leaves, salt, seasonings, and..."

Hakam and Team Diamond stared in disbelief as she listed out her order. Wridra was starting to sound a lot like that sleepy-looking boy.

Noticing that she had become the center of attention, Wridra looked rather puzzled.

“What?” she asked.

§

The guests were first led to the parlor room so they could put their luggage down.

They noisily walked barefoot on the tatami mats, which intrigued them. Kartina led the group and opened the paper sliding door, and they all found themselves at a loss for words.

Facing the parlor was a vivid garden. Low in the front and high in the back, the trees were neatly lined up yet unrestrained and full of life. The viewer’s eyes were naturally drawn to it like a beautiful painting.

According to Kartina, stillness and motion were key. The garden was designed to have a serene and peaceful atmosphere, but vermilion fish were swimming in the pond in contrast to that tranquility. Kartina explained that this represented the proper cycle of nature.

The women of Team Diamond had never seen such a harmonious spectacle. Eve the dark elf stared with wide-eyed excitement, then tossed her baggage aside with no regard for propriety.

“Whoa, this is so cool! That walkway we came from was pretty too, but it looks completely different from here!”

“I can hardly believe my eyes. That garden was prepared just for this room,” Puseri said to Eve. “They must have put a staggering amount of time and effort into making it. Kartina, would you like to become the official gardener for my mansion?”

Kartina turned around in response, looking displeased. She was a former knight, not a gardener. When she stepped into the room earlier, she had removed her armor known as Demon Arms and now wore something like a yukata.

“I wouldn’t be surprised just yet,” Kartina said. “There are shoji doors on either side of this room. So you can enjoy either view depending on your mood. Well, I suppose it would be easier to show you...”

As everyone watched her in confusion, Kartina closed the sliding paper door to the beautiful garden. The room that smelled of tatami grew faintly darker, and she slid open the shoji door on the other side.

Then, a completely different world was revealed to them. A lake could be seen beyond the transparent glass, glimmering brilliantly in the sunlight. The members of Team Diamond couldn't help but gather around the door and raise their voices in awe.

"There's plenty of beautiful greenery here, and you can swim and go fishing too. Just make sure you don't catch any lizardmen while you're fishing."

The guests were too busy staring at the view to notice Kartina's playful comment. They seemed both amazed and shocked at the unbelievably luxurious design.

Suddenly, they noticed something like a white island in the middle of the lake that elevated slowly and sprayed water all around itself. A rainbow formed from the angle of the sunlight, and Kartina chuckled.

"Ha ha, good timing. It likes to sunbathe once every hour. My master brought it here not too long ago, and I wasn't sure about it at first, but it's surprisingly scrupulous. It's happy to manage the lake water quality for us, so... What's wrong, Eve? Your shoulders are trembling."

"Th-Th-That's! That's the monster we saw at the beach!" Eve shouted.

Everyone seemed interested in the unusual sight except Eve and Puseri, who were turning pale. Though the color and size were different, it looked identical to the monster they had defeated on the summer island.

"It's Charybdis!" Puseri exclaimed, her knees trembling. "Although it's smaller and a different color, I'll never forget those tentacles!"

They were certain it was the very same monster from before. Eve especially had been unable to stand in their previous encounter, and just seeing the creature made her feel strange. "What's going on here?!" the two demanded, red-faced.

After pondering for a moment, Kartina handed them towels with a smile. In a sense, she was well suited for customer service. When faced with a troublesome guest, it was best to draw their attention with something else. It was pretty easy to distract them this way.

"The open-air bath has an even better view," Kartina said. "You ladies have it all to yourselves today, so feel free to use everything to your heart's

content. You can choose your own yukata over there too. Would you mind following me there?"

The group's eyes lit up with curiosity at the unfamiliar terms "open-air bath" and "yukata," and they eagerly shouted, "Yes!" They had completely forgotten about the ancient beast Charybdis in the commotion.

First, the guests would need to clean off all the dirt they had accumulated from walking around the desert and labyrinth. Kazuhiho and the others would be arriving soon, so they could all enjoy a nice dinner after their bath. If everything went as Kartina planned, they would forget all about that monster.

The rowdy crew left the parlor as the room was enveloped in warm sunlight.

§

Being used to living in the manor of black roses, Puseri wasn't accustomed to using a shared changing room or exposing her skin in front of others. Although she came from a prestigious family, she wasn't exactly considered a woman of high social status. That is to say, she and her teammates had been working like servants after the hero candidate had slain her family. Puseri undid one of the buttons around her collar, then looked around without moving.

"This is quite unnerving," she muttered.

Dissatisfied, she pursed her lips and glared slightly at the latticework wooden shelves. There were rows of shelves around chest height, which were presumably for storing clothes while one took a bath. She couldn't help but worry that someone would steal her belongings.

Of course, the members of Team Diamond were the only ones there that day, so she wouldn't have to worry much about that. Perhaps they were using this seemingly vulnerable system because they hadn't gotten around to making something better yet, or they put a lot of trust in their guests.

As Puseri considered this, she felt a hand on her shoulder. The barbarian woman, Darsha, and the dark elf, Eve, stood there with their well-trained bodies shamelessly exposed.

"What, are you embarrassed or something? We're all women here, so who cares?" Eve said.

"Yup, there's no point in worrying about it," Darsha agreed. "We're guests here. No need to act so reserved."

They puffed their chests out as they spoke, but with those words coming from some of the most well-endowed women in the group, Puseri felt like she was losing in a different sense.

What she didn't understand was how they were so shapely in the feminine departments when they had such rock-hard abs. A line went up the center of their belly buttons with some full curvy breasts higher up.

"I am not embarrassed. I am just not used to this sort of thing," Puseri said, blushing.

It wasn't often she had an opportunity like this, and she couldn't help but stare. Their pectoralis major and minor muscles appeared to firmly support their breasts, which might have been the secret behind their voluptuousness.

Darsha and Eve looked confused as Puseri stared openly. "We'll see you later," they said and waved, then headed outside, buck naked. Puseri watched as they walked away with their hips swaying and found herself hard-pressed to decide what to do. She couldn't bring herself to go outside looking like that.

Walking around under the sun with no clothes on was too high of a hurdle, even for a battle-hardened veteran like her. She hadn't imagined that she would not only be seen by the others, but that she'd be going outside as well. And yet, she would only worry her teammates if she spent too much time here. They already looked worried as she stood between two girls. Seeing those friendly brown and light-blue eyes, she could finally calm down.

"Ah, you two were changing as well? Then let's go together, shall we?" she said.

The girls' expressions lit up with smiles like blooming flowers. *They're adorable!* Puseri thought and felt her heart tingle from their loveliness.

The two girls, Hakua and Miliasha, had stuck by Puseri's side ever since she had become the master of Team Diamond. The girls didn't have families and could be heard crying to themselves in bed at times. That was why Puseri would sleep with them whenever they felt lonely at night. The three of them were like sisters... Or perhaps they were becoming closer than blood relatives, though only Puseri wasn't aware of this fact. She had always been insensitive in both combat and love, so she had difficulty realizing that the girls were infatuated with her.

"Okay, it's time to undress. There's no need to be embarrassed. It's best not to let yourself be bothered in situations like these," Puseri said.

She began undoing the fasteners on her dress as if to lead by example.

Her back became bare, and she felt a tinge of embarrassment as her collarbones were exposed to the open air. Perhaps she had gained a bit of tolerance from wearing a swimsuit previously.

Clothes rustled, and when Puseri was left wearing only her underwear, she felt someone's gaze on her. Then she realized Hakua and Miliasha stared at her intently from both sides.

Hakua came from a bloodline of diviners and had the ability to predict the future. The way her brown pigtails swayed and her eyes stayed locked on Puseri's bare skin was a peculiar sight.

"You're so beautiful, Miss Puseri," she said in a dreamy whisper.

Puseri was at a loss for how to react. She was used to getting compliments, but it was different when they came from a girl she loved like her own little sister.

She then felt Miliasha gently touch her spine, and she shivered reflexively.

"Your skin is so flawless. May I get a closer look?" the young girl asked.

Puseri felt they were close enough already, but the girls stared at her with pleading eyes, and she nodded without thinking. She just couldn't resist when they blinked their teary puppy dog eyes. Puseri felt her cheeks burning and admitted to herself that they evoked an urge to hug and protect them.

"We'll undo the back for you. If you'll excuse us..." Miliasha said.

"Oh, wait. I can do that myself..." Puseri protested.

"Please leave these matters to us, Miss Puseri. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but this is the least we can do to repay you for always protecting us."

With her refusal softly rejected, she let the girls undo her underwear from both sides without resistance. Yet she could hardly stand the way she was slowly getting laid bare, as if they were relishing the moment. Their eyes on her already felt too intense as it was.

"Miss Puseri, we can't see properly from behind. Please open your arms."

Puseri couldn't understand why that was necessary. But, again, she couldn't say no to those eyes of theirs. She spread her arms slowly and timidly, exposing her soft body from the armpits down to the young girls. Yet she felt her face grow hotter from this simple motion and their heated gazes upon her.

She could no longer bear to look and, with her cheeks flushed bright red, closed her eyes. Because of this, she couldn't see that this gesture was a welcome treat for the two girls, and their eyes lit up with excitement as she slowly revealed more and more of her skin.

"Please don't move. The fabric could leave a scratch if it rubs against your skin."

"Yes, your skin is very sensitive, Miss Puseri. Oh, it's so beautiful."

Their hot breath touched Puseri's skin, and she shivered.

Now fully exposed, she felt ticklish from their exhalations on her chest and back. Perhaps it was because she was closing her eyes, but her skin felt extra sensitive and grew warmer from their heavy breathing.

Puseri peeked an eye open, then immediately closed it again. At that moment, she had seen the two girls gazing intently at her with flushed faces, so close that they were almost touching her.

However, Puseri wasn't exactly unsullied herself. Seeing the partially undressed girls, the thought looping in her mind was *They're so cute!* She was no different from them; she just hadn't realized it.

Her breathing soon grew more heated and shallow as the thought repeated in her mind. Then, a voice rang out like cold water dumped upon their heads.

"What's going on here?"

"Gah! Ah, D-Doula!"

Doula stood there casting a dubious look upon the trio, her well-toned paladin's body wrapped in a towel. Seeing Puseri turn away to hide, she let out an exasperated sigh.

"You didn't tell them I got here early, Kartina?" Doula asked.

"My apologies. I figured you would see them eventually, anyway. Miss Puseri, as I mentioned earlier, the hot spring area has a spectacular view. Would you care to join us?" Kartina said.

Puseri sighed with relief at the invitation, pulled herself together, and decided to undress and head outside. A look flashed upon the two innocent-looking young girls' faces as if they were thinking, *We were so close.* But no one was around to see.

The view of the glimmering lake beyond the rising steam was spectacular indeed. The astonishing sight of the lake stretched as far as the

eye could see, other than the hedge that was just high enough to keep the area private. Puseri stood there in awe at the bold yet delicate spectacle.

Waves rippled across the water's surface, and the wind reached her skin from far beyond. The steam danced into the air, then settled to tranquility once again. Or so they thought until they noticed the birds chirping ceaselessly and saw deer eating grass in the distance.

Puseri shivered with a towel in hand, feeling the harmony she had sensed in the garden earlier. She finally understood what it meant for a land to be truly blessed.

"Unbelievable... I thought this was just a bathhouse..." she said in a daze, and even her own voice sounded distant.

No one could have predicted such a stellar sight.

It was customary to use a basin to wash oneself before entering a bath, but no one from the desert country used a lot of water. Puseri's teammates, who had already been enjoying the luxurious use of hot water, turned to face her. They each had a broad smile on their face as if they had been in heaven the entire time.

Puseri let out a deep sigh for the umpteenth time. The girls clinging to her from either side shared her sentiment, their mouths still hanging open.

"Hey, Puseri, how long are you gonna stand there naked?"

She finally came to her senses at the sound of the others laughing.

Puseri realized this was what it meant to be truly comfortable. Her mouth curled into a smile at the inexplicable sense of liberation, and she felt her stress dissolve into the wind.

She washed herself as instructed by Kartina, then slowly dipped her toes into the hot water and shivered. The water was lukewarm, and judging by its slightly thick consistency, it didn't seem to be plain hot water.

Somehow, she knew her body craved this water. She soaked down to her chest, down to her shoulders, and breathed out in ecstasy. Puseri wasn't sure if she could ever leave.

"It makes me wonder if we should be relaxing like this when there's a war going on," Eve said as she stretched her limbs. Despite her comment, she looked rather euphoric now that she was temporarily relieved of the weights that made her shoulders stiff.

The eight members of Team Diamond, Kartina, and Doula sat in a circle. There was still room to spare, but they sat shoulder to shoulder, indicating

how close they were as a team.

Puseri tied up her twilight-colored hair as she responded to Eve's comment. Of course, the two girls on each side of her had their eyes glued on her the entire time.

"It may seem like we're just relaxing, but this is part of our preparations for clearing the labyrinth. Sir Hakam and Great Aja will undertake a duty to protect the labyrinth, so we're using this place to resume our training. Isn't that right, Doula?"

"That's right," Doula agreed. "Our team has to give orders from the rear, so we have it rough, in particular. Things may be even more difficult for Kazuhiho and Mariabelle, but Great Aja seemed happy to finally have a disciple to inherit his secret arts."

Eve looked surprised. Aja's secret arts could create records of the labyrinth using Magic Tools and control information between the members of each team. Besides, it was highly unusual that he would pass down his knowledge to a mere Sorceress, and a young elf.

"She's that smart, huh? So Sir Hakam is training your team, and Great Aja is training Mariabelle. What's Kazu doing, then?" she asked.

"Zera and Gaston are training him. All the way from morning to night," Doula replied.

"I've been teaching him martial arts using swords too. In exchange, he gives me lectures regarding monsters," Kartina said as she stretched while turning toward them.

Eve grimaced. Training with the three of them sounded like absolute hell. She had heard Kazuhiro was also being trained on how to control energy, but she wanted no part of something that sounded so sketchy.

The group's bodies and lips felt looser after soaking in the bath, though that wasn't the only reason. But Isuka, the demon-blood woman, cracked her neck and opened her mouth to speak.

"Gedovar contacted me earlier. They want me to work for them."

"Ah, now that you mention it, I got a message like that too. But I was being manipulated then, so I only remember it vaguely."

They laughed as they said they had nearly forgotten about it, but one person in the group had a different reaction. The alliance commander Doula blinked. "What?" she said, flabbergasted.

Eve, who had been lazing about on her elbows, raised her head. She then

said, “So, what are you gonna do? Don’t tell me you’re gonna betray us, Isuka.”

“Hm? There would be no point in me defecting on my own. I’m only reporting what happened,” Isuka replied.

It seemed demons had a low tolerance for hot water since she stood up with a splash and sat on a nearby smooth rock. A pleasant breeze blew by, and she had to resist the urge to lie down and take a nap right there.

The troubling thing was that, in the corner of her vision, there was a bench that would be perfect for lying down on. They were in the middle of a conversation involving Team Diamond and both of their countries, but Isuka was shooting glances at the bench. Right now, the temptation to lie down was more distressing than turning her back on her home country.

Suddenly, Kartina spoke up.

“So you’ve been contacted too. I haven’t responded since I’ve been busy, but what did you tell them?”

“Hm? Oh, it was some pompous general guy, so I haven’t said anything. Cassey, Milia, how about you two?” Isuka asked.

The two girls tilted their heads with a blank expression. The realization that no one had responded to the general set in, and silence filled the bathhouse. Puseri considered laughing out loud, but this was a matter that would affect her greatly. After pondering for some time, she finally spoke.

“I would like to avoid any rash decisions. As you all know, my bloodline’s family precept is ‘We have no masters.’ I could never serve Gedovar while hiding in Arilai.”

“I know,” Isuka agreed. “And I would like to keep living with all of you here. I don’t have any family over in Gedovar. But if anyone wants to go back, I won’t blame you.”

Everyone looked around, wondering who would want to go back.

Now that they were free from the hero candidate, this was the most enjoyable time for Team Diamond. They could go on vacations together, and they had been displaying better teamwork in combat than ever before. A whole minute passed with no one saying anything, and the group’s collective gaze settled on the demon girl again.

“No one?” Isuka said. “That’s fine, but if you want to defect, you should say so. It’s best to be up-front about this sort of thing.”

“Okay!” they all replied, except Doula, who felt dazed by the situation.

There was absolutely no hint that anyone even considered defecting.

She understood how they felt. It would depend on how the upcoming war unfolded, but there was no benefit to defecting with how things were at the moment. Yet, as the manager of the alliance, Doula wanted to scream, “If you’re going to talk about secrets, do it when I’m not around!” It seemed the moment had passed without anything happening, but Doula felt completely exhausted.

The group continued to enjoy their vacation after their bath.

The premises were well-equipped with facilities like various bathhouses and saunas, and they even had oil massages given by lizardmen. They had some chilled tea, took a nap, relaxed in a fragrant stone sauna, and went to get massages. They squealed in excitement upon discovering coffee milk and couldn’t be happier.

However, Kitase, Mariabelle, and Wridra knew there was more to the invitation. They might have realized what it was if they had known what this mansion needed most then. However, they had completely loosened up after having so much fun that they danced right on top of the trap that had been laid out for them.

And so, the boy and elf woke up in this world.

Chapter of Betrayal, Episode 2: Welcome, Team Diamond

Now this was refreshing.

When I woke up, I saw sunlit shoji doors that made it look like the world had turned white.

As a Japanese person, I couldn't help but feel at home with the tatami mats and futon laid out in the Japanese-style room. Even if I had never lived in this type of room before, I had a feeling it would still feel right somehow.

The Arkdragon truly had an appreciation for proper form. Even in my morning daze, I was thoroughly impressed that she had achieved this deep understanding of harmony in such a short time.

I heard an adorable yawn and turned around to see Mariabelle, in her pajamas, stretching her arms and legs. She rubbed her eyes, then noticed the shoji doors like I had.

We had stayed up unusually late last night, which was probably why she still looked sleepy. Her clothes were slightly disheveled, and her smooth collarbones were almost attractive to look at. Marie blinked a few times, then finally realized we were in the second floor hall and slowly sat up.

"Good morning... I guess it's true that autumn is the reading season. I completely overslept," she said.

"It won't hurt to sleep in every once in a while. It'll be funny to hear Doula call someone like you a sleepyhead too," I replied.

She complained that she didn't want such a nickname as we put the bedding away. We folded the futon into thirds, put it in the closet, tossed the pillows in there too, and opened the shoji door. The fresh air that blew toward us woke us up immediately.

"Oh, have you been waiting for us to wake up, Wridra?" Marie asked.

I turned around and saw a black cat curled up under the sun on a conveniently placed cushion out on the veranda. There was a small lake out there too, and it looked like the perfect place to hang out and relax.

The cat turned around in reaction to Marie's voice and meowed somewhat grumpily. There were no cats in this world, and despite appearances, this wasn't actually a cat. It was a familiar of the Arkdragon, but Marie and I were pretty much the only ones who knew its true nature.

It seemed the familiar wasn't waiting for us to wake up but was hogging the veranda so we wouldn't take our sweet time here. Sure enough, when Marie went over to pick up the creature, it evaded her hands and quickly walked toward the garden. Then it meowed again as if to say, "Hurry up and get to the main building."

"Maybe Team Diamond got here way before us. We should get going," I suggested.

"Yes, we should," Marie agreed. "I'm looking forward to our walk to the main building. I love the scenery here."

Our bedroom was a bit distant from the main building. Wridra was considerate enough to put us here so we could rest without being disturbed, which I appreciated greatly. It'd been quite some time since we didn't have to worry about being seen while going to and from Japan.

I removed my leather sandals and walked along the well-maintained garden, where I heard a splash from the pond, which could've been the fish that had mistakenly thought it was feeding time. I looked over and saw a reflection of myself around the same height as Marie. My facial features looked much younger than usual, but it was no trick of the light.

Instead, I aged much slower in this world and looked to be around fifteen years old in appearance. I still didn't understand how that worked, but I guessed I only grew older here while physically in this world.

When I glanced to my side, Marie was much closer to me than usual. Just seeing those eyes that looked like purple crystals blinking so close somehow made me feel lucky. She smiled, perhaps feeling the same way. Or maybe that was a hint of mischief in her eyes, with anticipation of what was to come.

"Hehe, today's the day," she said. "It's time for Operation: Recruit Team Diamond."

"Yup. We're way understaffed, and they're a group of professionals that regularly wear maid outfits. I'd love to have them working for us."

Kartina and the lizardmen had been doing a surprisingly good job taking care of the garden. But the interior of the mansion hadn't been properly

managed because it was so big. The food was an issue too. Fortunately, we had access to great ingredients, but thinking about the time and effort needed to cook them moving forward worried me.

A black-haired woman waiting for us at the end of the path scooped up the black cat that trotted ahead of us. It was Wridra: the familiar's master, the one who had created the majority of this mansion, and the legendary Arkdragon. Her brow was somewhat furrowed in displeasure, though I wasn't sure why.

"Fools, we've spent so much time meticulously devising our plan, and you waste your time on reading. If you had at least watched anime or a movie, I could have enjoyed it as well," she complained.

Wridra bared her teeth in frustration, but I found the gesture charming. When we first met, she didn't have much experience in her draconian form and wasn't used to expressing emotions. I felt that she had developed a feminine charm after all the time we lived together.

"Sorry for the wait," I said. "Is everything going according to plan so far?"

"Of course... Well, I would like to think so, but they will surely lose interest soon if all we can offer are baths and massages. We must prepare the food right away," Wridra replied.

Her long black hair on the sides of her face covered her ears, but the back was tied up with a piece of string, making her pale nape stand out. She looked good in a kimono, even with her unique well-defined facial features.

Marie reached out her hand, and Wridra readjusted her arm to hold the black cat one-handed as she held the elf's hand with her open one. The two had become very close over time and were now like sisters. Strangely enough, if someone wanted to know who looked like the older sister, my answer would change depending on when the question was asked.

"I cannot believe you allowed yourselves to stay up late," Wridra grumbled.

"I'm sorry, Wridra. I'm sure you'd understand, but autumn is perfect for getting absorbed in books because it's so tranquil. It's almost like being in a library..."

Wridra was about to say something as Marie went on about the appeals of staying up late, but she ended up closing her mouth again. Her obsidian eyes then met mine, and she shot me a look that said, "*You* be careful from

now on.” I nodded, of course, but it was going to depend on Marie’s mood, so my response wasn’t trustworthy.

Now, the issue we faced was that we needed more workers to keep the mansion running.

If we could recruit Team Diamond, we wouldn’t just be able to keep the mansion running, but we could also greatly enhance the services offered. The thing was that they were wealthier than us, so we wouldn’t be able to entice them with money. This meant we had to win them over with coziness, livability, and delicious food. We needed them to *want* to live here by showing how great this place was.

“So, how are they doing so far?” I asked.

“Hm, I shall show you,” Wridra said.

With that, she let go of Marie’s hand and pointed up. We heard a strange humming sound, then a visual image appeared midair.

This visualization magic was the ace up our sleeve. It allowed us to listen to their conversations and get direct feedback about the facilities. We didn’t have to worry about getting noticed, and we had an overwhelming advantage in the intel we had at our disposal. But the image that appeared showed the women taking a bath, and Marie used her hands to cover my eyes from the shockingly high amount of exposed skin in the footage.

“My goodness!” Marie shouted. “Do you two realize that peeping is a crime?!”

“I’m sorry! Wridra, no more image projections please!” I said.

“Hm, very well. Then I will keep it to audio only,” Wridra said. “But I must say, it will take away from the immersion.”

She grumbled under her breath, but there was no way we would secretly watch these people bathe. Then my eyes bulged out when I heard the audio that came in.

“Ahh, that feels so good! This massage is amazing... There, mm-hmm, deeper!”

We heard what sounded like Eve’s erotic voice and panicked. Marie hurriedly covered my ears, but I felt something pressing against my back in her haste. I couldn’t help how my heart beat faster from the soft sensation against my back and the audio playing out loud. Marie, of course, wasn’t amused.

“Stop it! No more audio either! You two need to use more common

sense!” she scolded.

Moments after our mission had started, all of our trump cards were rendered unusable. We had obtained no information at all and were made painfully aware of how daunting our task would be.

§

I chopped some greens on the cutting board.

The kitchen was far more spacious than the one I had at home, but there were a few differences in this world. For example, a Fire Lizard spirit lay where the gas burner would be, looking up at me with its beady eyes as if to say, “Are you ready yet?”

They had been getting summoned just for cooking lately, so they seemed used to it by now. When summoned, its face said, “Yeah, yeah... Hot pot, right?” Fire lizards couldn’t speak, but that would’ve been my guess.

The trouble was that we had to gather a ton of food, so we had to take multiple trips to fill the refrigerator. The fridge was also strange, and it used some sort of technique to keep the food from spoiling without cooling the air inside. I wouldn’t have understood how it worked even if I had asked, so I didn’t really think about it.

This forest was rich in soil and water, with plenty of vegetables and fish available. I attributed this to the former floor master, Shirley, circulating souls here. The forest had become even more stable lately, so they had begun hunting the deer and boars that were turning far more common. According to Wridra, their meat was extremely high quality because it hadn’t been tainted by demon matter. Supposedly, the soil had been defiled in an ancient battle, which was why food tasted so bad in this world. The food from this place would likely sell for a high price if exported, but there would also be problems when other merchants took notice, so we wanted to keep the products for local consumption only.

That was why we thankfully didn’t have to worry about acquiring food on the second floor. If we ever needed anything, we just had to travel somewhere with Wridra and buy it.

There were some simple ingredients, like boar meat, wild vegetables, some greens, and mushrooms. I had only brought miso, eggs, bonito flakes, and green onions from Japan, which was a lot more cost-effective than

bringing boxed meals—in terms of expenses in Japan, that is.

"I wonder if we'll eventually start taking naps to eat in this world," I said.

"No, thank you. I want to have Japanese food when I'm over there. There isn't very much variety in the cooking here yet. But the fish is good, of course."

With that, Marie began washing the soil off of the vegetables right beside me. The Fire Lizard she had summoned served as evidence that her skill level as a cooking assistant was much higher in the fantasy world. But seeing the elf girl in her kappogi smock and a triangular headscarf over her head, she looked too cute to be described as fantasy-like.

I agreed with Marie's opinion that the fish here tasted good. Seafood wasn't just about flavor; freshness was also key. Shellfish particularly lose their natural sweetness and get a distinctive, peculiar flavor as time goes by, though there were no seas to find them in around here.

"Anyway, boar is a pain to cook, huh? I didn't know they had so many steps to prepare," I said.

"Yes, they're not easy. We have to choose a female boar at the right time of year so the quality is good, gut and bleed it, remove the skin, and cure the meat before one could fully cook it. You wouldn't know how much work goes into it if you always bought meat at the supermarket," Marie explained.

As an elf who had grown up in a forest, Marie was far more knowledgeable about this stuff than a person of modern times like me. The lizardmen had already completed all of the procedures that Marie had described. I was relieved that I only had to watch them handle the carving for us.

Autumn was certainly good timing as we had obtained high-quality meat with plenty of fat. Plus, I had learned about techniques such as cold aging from the library. It never hurt to know, but I didn't expect such information to come in handy when I wasn't a hunter or anything.

All I had to do next was cut the boar meat into thin slices and put them on a plate like I had seen it done before. I had learned about these types of dishes by watching videos during break time at work, since it was a nice way to kill some time. Using freshly caught meat here made things a bit

more complicated than just making a hot pot at home, but I was excited to find out how it tasted.

I picked up the handle and carried the pot along with the Fire Lizard, which had fallen asleep. It would probably be surprised to find Team Diamond surrounding it when it woke up.

The women should be coming out of the bathing area soon. As we arranged the plates along the long table and put bonito flakes in the pot, Team Diamond noisily returned.

The sliding screen was pushed open with a *clack*, and the women we were familiar with from the labyrinth stood there adorned in brightly colored yukata. Eve was passionately explaining how wonderful her massage was until her blue eyes widened upon seeing us.

"Welcome back, everyone. Did you enjoy your bath?"

"Oh, it's Kazu and Marie! Whaaat, are we really about to have some Japanese food after our bath? Oh, oh, got any beer?" Eve was in a remarkably good mood as soon as she saw the food.

She roughly put her arms around Marie's and my shoulders, but it wasn't a good idea to distract someone when they cooked. We did have beer, of course: some special brews from the port town of Ozloi. As soon as I told her this, Eve did a little jig and shouted, "Yes!"

Everyone else watched with blank expressions, but Marie and I grinned, plotting to show them the time of their lives. Through this dinner, they would come to know the charms of this mansion, and we just might recruit them to work here if they were interested.

However, their leader Puseri found all the hospitality worrisome and knelt down on the tatami mat while straightening her collar.

"I can't help but feel bad having you cook for us when we are on the same raid team," she said.

"No, no, please don't worry about it. You showed us hospitality in the manor of black roses. It would make us happy if you enjoyed your stay here," I replied. *Feel free to live here if you'd like, heh heh...* Still, I hid my inner thoughts behind a thick facade like the office worker I was. It appeared that having experience in society could be useful at times.

A gentle atmosphere filled the room as I prepared the pot with some miso, sake, and mirin. Making hot pot was easy, but the aroma with so much depth was unusual to them. They sat down around the horigotatsu-

style table with their collective gaze fixed upon the bizarre pot dishes.

We needed about three pots to serve the eight women, so Marie and I quickly brought over the ingredients and adjusted the fire. When she saw us work so busily, Puseri muttered, “You two look adorable in your matching outfits. You’re like a little husband-and-wife pair. You said those smocks are called kappogi?”

“Look, she’s turning red. Don’t tell me you two wanna get married or something. Ah ha ha, now they’re both red. How cute!”

Eve really didn’t pull any punches. I looked to my side and saw that Marie had turned bright red up to her long ears. She hid her mouth with the tray she was holding and glanced at me...and I was too embarrassed to meet her eyes. We were supposed to entertain the guests tonight, but I felt like they were about to wear me down with their energy already. I made an awkward expression, and everyone laughed in amusement.

“I’m quite amazed by how exotic every part of this manor is. The scenery and the quality of the bath water were both exquisite,” Puseri said.

“Yeah, that was crazy. But the view is so open that I worry if someone can see us out there. Not that I mind, but I’d feel bad for the little ones,” Eve replied.

“Come to think of it, remember how Charbydis started acting up? Maybe it caught someone peeping on us. If that’s the case, they probably got a taste of its tentacles.”

“No way! Ha ha ha!”

I laughed along with them and dismissed the ridiculous idea, but several male elite members of the raid team breathed heavily in the forest at that moment. They were half naked in their soaking wet and tattered clothing after having been completely defeated in a fierce battle.

But they held each other arm in arm and vowed they would triumph one day, their fighting spirit burning strong. Charybdis was a powerful foe with its Indestructible ability and couldn’t be defeated by normal means. However, the fire in their eyes made it clear they hadn’t given up. After all, they were true perverts...or rather, warriors.

Today was a day off for entertaining Team Diamond. But these men were full of energy and had no time to rest. Their large group of eighteen members had gathered in response to a call for training that would be as intense as a real fight. The mission ended up being much more rigorous than expected, and their fatigue was greater than they were used to. Not to mention, they had had zero success so far. Still, their willpower hadn’t diminished. They fought on the principle that no dream was unachievable, but all I could think was how dumb they were.

Beyond the glass was a verdant Japanese garden. The women of Team Diamond were conversing joyfully about the unfamiliar sight and the colorful yukata they wore for the first time.

Eventually, their conversations grew quiet, as the star of the show had arrived on a big plate.

High-quality thin slices of boar meat were arranged like flower petals on said plate. The dish’s presentation wasn’t exactly perfect since an amateur had done it, but the group cheered as soon as they saw it. We tossed the meat into the pots one by one, but boar meat was very different from pork or beef. Despite it being chewy and very robust, it tasted better the more we cooked it in the broth.

We added burdock root to negate the smell, then added greens, mushrooms, and a bunch of green onions after some time. That was when the appetizing fragrance of miso filled the air. After sweating and expending energy in the bath, they couldn’t help but gulp at the feast before them.

“Urgh, it smells so good... I’m getting hungry!”

We were happy to hear the desperation in their voices.

Wild boar hot pot has been a beloved dish since the olden days. They

say it'd been around since the Jomon period, and anyone who ate it with high-quality meat was sure to be addicted to its deep flavor. Luckily, the meat we were using today was top-grade stuff.

The aroma of miso mixed with the meat juices and the sweetness of vegetables stirred our appetites. The smell of food was very important, and it affected a part of our sense of taste. It allowed one's brain to know when food would be tasty and made your tongue prepare to eat automatically.

I could hear more people gulping out loud.

As mentioned, boar meat becomes more tender and tasty the more it gets cooked. A delectable fragrance was coming from the bubbling pot, and everyone had stopped talking to wait expectantly for the food.

Finally, Marie began to bring out the beer bottles, and it was finally time to unveil the sumptuous meal. I removed the lid from one of the pots, and fatty boar meat covered the surface of the stew.

"Yup, looks ready to go," I confirmed. "Please dig in, everyone. Today is for the ladies, so why don't you have some too, Marie?"

"Oh! Can I? It smells so good... I don't think I can say no!" Marie said.

I gestured for everyone to start eating, as I still had the recruitment mission to work on. Everyone gathered around the pots at once. Marie and I scooped some food onto small plates for the younger ones, and they began biting into the boar meat immediately.

Boar meat looked very fatty, but the fat content was actually very different from other meats. For example, it felt like hard wax whenever I cut into it with a kitchen knife. But once cooked, it turned extremely buttery and tender with a firm texture that was easy to chew through thanks to its long cooking time. The women's eyes lit up from the miso flavor and sweet aftertaste.

"Mmmm!!!"

The taste made one's mouth water so much it nearly hurt, and they could hardly even form any words. Juices erupted from the meat and vegetables with each bite. Strangely, the food didn't feel too fatty at all. Every bite was full of delicious sweetness but left a rustic, nutty aftertaste. Judging by their expressions, it looked like it was true that the fat from boar meat didn't sit heavy in your stomach no matter how much of it you ate.

The red meat was amazingly tender as it came apart easily, and it bore repeating just how sweet it tasted. Flavorwise, it was somewhere between

pork and beef. There was still some gaminess to it but it felt smooth on the tongue.

The sunlit guest room grew more lively with the sound of laughter. I knew this was the perfect time to recommend some ice-cold beer.

Even the veterans of Team Diamond stood no chance at resisting a chilly drink with some delicious fatty food, especially after a hot bath. They gulped down the refreshingly bubbly beers and let out a satisfied sigh like they had when they sank into the bath water.

“What is this?! It’s so good! I wanna live in Japan if you guys get stuff like this!”

Eve shook her head in disbelief, but boar meat hot pot wasn’t common even in Japan. It was quite expensive at a nice-quality restaurant, and I wished she’d stop saying “Japan” when our interworld travels were supposed to be secret.

I offered her some more beer to shut her up. Her glass made a *clink* as the bottle touched it and filled it with the golden brew.

Everyone’s body sought good food. You could eat more than usual when good food was around, and the body demanded more even when your stomach was full.

Once everyone had eaten their fill, there was a nice Japanese garden to gaze at while they rubbed their bellies. The harmonious space before them offered a different kind of luxury from dining as the sun slowly slipped away.

“Luxury” was an apt way to put it. Even after they had fulfilled all of their wants, the guest room offered even more. They ate and drank to their heart’s content. The meal was remarkably simple but gave them vitality that could only come from eating wild meat.

The group was sweating from the steaming hot pot, and their clothes had become untidy over time as they drank. I had to consciously not look since the women from the fantasy world were too alluring. Their thighs rubbed together in the heat, and in their addled state of mind, their yukata were more open at the chest. I turned away, as it seemed they didn’t have their guard up against me since I looked like a child.

Several of the women were lying down on the tatami, with one of them mumbling, “Ahh, there’s no way I’d defect from this side...” I didn’t understand what she was talking about, so I just cocked my head in

confusion.

It didn't take long before the pots were empty and many people were on the ground, but the main event hadn't started yet. We put some washed rice in each pot to make some porridge. The rice began absorbing the flavor and stock from the meat and vegetables as soon as we added it. This stuff was absolutely delicious. There was a talent on TV that always shouted, "Delicious!" This would have been an appropriate time to do so.

I mixed some eggs into the pot and taste tested it, and I couldn't help but smile. A great amount of umami was concentrated in the rice, which was the perfect way to end the dinner.

Everyone was already full, but after taking one bite, their bodies demanded more, leaving them in a struggle between groaning from satiety and delectable flavor. It seemed the guests had thoroughly enjoyed their stay. By the time we cleaned up and left the room, they were all lying down on the tatami mats with smiles on their faces. Maybe we had gone a bit too far, but it wasn't my fault. If anyone had complaints, they should direct them to Wridra and Shirley for preparing such high-quality ingredients.

And so, I left Team Diamond's guest room with Marie, whose belly had been stuffed to the brim with food.

I decided to take a walk with Marie in the evening after I had finished washing the dishes. Insects were singing before I knew it, and there was a feeling of autumn in the air that you couldn't really experience in the city.

We walked along a small path until the view eventually cleared and revealed a vast lake. Our feet stopped involuntarily, the leaves rustling around us.

"Ah, it's so beautiful," Marie said. "I can't believe we had a part in making this place."

"Yeah, I don't think anyone would believe us even if we told them. I mean, this is supposed to be an ancient labyrinth. Oh, there's a rest area over there, so let's go and watch the sunset together," I replied.

Marie cheered happily. There was a fluttering butterfly pattern on her light, cherry blossom-colored yukata. When I reached out my hand, she didn't fly away like a real butterfly, but her fingers wrapped around mine. We then walked together, her steps lively and cheerful.

And yet, I couldn't help but think about Team Diamond's recruitment.

“I doubt we’d be able to get them to work for us right away, so maybe we should wait a few days, then talk to Puseri. I don’t know if she’d be willing to accept when she has her mission, though,” I said.

For some reason, Marie tilted her head. She then asked me what I was talking about, and I wondered if she had forgotten our plans during dinner.

“You know, about onboarding more people for the manor,” I said.

“Hm? Oh, that’s right,” Marie replied. “I didn’t forget, of course. Yes, maybe we’ll need a bit more time.”

“They have a big manor of their own in their country, so it might be difficult to manage. I guess we’ll never know until we ask, though.”

We weren’t in a hurry or anything, so I decided to be patient. There were a lot of options even if this didn’t work out. We could hire someone else, but it was unlikely that we would find someone more reliable than Team Diamond.

“Yes, we can try something else if they decline. More importantly, we need to sit down at that comfortable rest stop and enjoy the sound of chirping bugs and the lake view at sunset. Let’s go,” Marie said.

She was right, of course. I let her take me by the hand and walked with her.

Marie looked like she was glowing in the dim light, partly due to the lightness of her skin. A year ago, I never would have imagined we would be walking hand in hand through a path surrounded by plants and flowers. It wasn’t an overstatement to say my entire life had changed since then. She turned to me with a smile and said, “Let’s go, Kazuhiro-san.” That was all I needed to feel content.

She had given me what I had for so long as a child. It was hard to believe, and the warmth at my fingertips felt like salvation.

As we walked along the strangely nostalgic landscape, a memory occurred to me: when I was a child, a woman whom I wished to save me held my hand as I reached out so desperately.

Don’t remember. Don’t let the warmth of her hand remind you of your mother.

I had been telling myself that all this time, but the setting sun reminded me of my childhood.

I thought my mother was a beautiful person. She had black eyes and long, black hair, and something about her made it seem as if she were one

step away from the rest of the world. Even though I could remember the impression she gave me, I couldn't remember a word she had told me. I didn't know her voice or her warmth.

All I could remember was being led by the hand, like I was now, and being embraced against her chest. Those memories were still clear to me, and I had wanted it more than anything for so long. I didn't just want to be held like other children, but I had been waiting for the moment she would acknowledge and talk to me.

That was why I was so proud, as everything seemed to glow whenever she held me. The curtain wavering in the wind caressed my cheek, tickling me. If my life were a movie, that would have been the ideal ending.

She was laughing then. I remembered being surprised because I had never seen that expression on her since I was born. But I saw her looking out the window and followed her gaze to a bloodred sunset. It was so terrifying...

Then, I heard the sound of a stranger's voice.

Don't remember. Don't remember what happened after that.

Marie and I held our hands tightly together, then released them as I forgot to breathe for some time.

She looked back at me, confused, and I clutched my hand to my chest, hoping she wouldn't notice the cold sweat pouring out of me. Even when she asked what was wrong, I told her it was nothing.

It *was* nothing. This ordinary and natural relationship of ours was more precious to me than anything in the world. People say it's easy to get sentimental in the fall. I was sure it was the season that was making me feel like I was about to collapse. I braced myself and managed to make myself look as I always did.

"Sorry, I stumbled. We should hurry before the sun sets," I said.

"Sure," she said with a pause at the beginning.

Unlike usual, I couldn't tell what Marie was thinking at all.

We continued walking hand in hand, then noticed someone was already sitting in the rest area facing the lake. The sky was slowly turning darker to match her twilight-colored hair.

There was a roof overhead and several sofas there, making it a nice

place to watch the lake and relax. Fishing was also allowed here if anyone felt so inclined. It didn't seem like either of the women would be interested, though.

"What are you doing here by yourself?" I asked Puseri.

She looked up at the sound of my voice. Her eyes met mine, twilight like her hair, and she blinked several times as if she were just waking from a dream.

"Oh, hello. You two are close, as always. But you shouldn't show it off so much and should know women are envious creatures," Puseri said.

I was slightly surprised by how quiet her voice was compared to her usual demeanor. She was in a pensive mood, and her expression was somewhat dark. Wondering what had happened, Marie and I exchanged looks, then sat on the sofa.

"Is something bothering you? Was it the food?" I asked.

"No, it isn't that," Puseri replied. "I've never had so much fun before, and today was full of surprises."

I let out a sigh of relief, which the wind carried away. I waited for her to continue, then her rouged lips finally parted again to speak.

"What do you think about demons?"

The question had come straight out of left field. She seemed calm, but her eyes weren't delighted, as I could tell this was a very important question. However, this was an awkward question to answer for us. It wasn't as if we could tell her we were already friends with an Arkdragon or that Shirley was a former floor master. We didn't have any opinions about demons, but would it be bad to tell her that? While I thought about my answer, Marie spoke up before me.

"I think it would depend on who it was. I couldn't get along with the bandits that used to lurk in the labyrinth. But we're living here with Kartina."

"Yeah, that's true," I agreed. "We don't have any prejudices about that sort of thing. That's coming from someone who knows a lot of different monster languages, so there's no mistake about it."

Puseri nodded. She nodded several more times, as if pondering the thought internally, and opened her moist eyes in the dim light.

"There is a demon on my team. No one has prejudices against her now, but people will see her differently when the war eventually begins. It pains

me to have them live in the manor of black roses when this happens."

The tears that were streaming down her face shocked us. We finally realized Puseri was worried about her friends and their future. Before we knew it, we each softly put a hand on her arms from either side. It felt as though if we didn't, then she would carry the weight of it all by herself.

Her tears continued to flow, and the rest area grew dark. Puseri touched our hands with hers, then spoke, her voice full of hatred.

"I'm sure...you aren't aware of what happened when we were going through the second floor of the ancient labyrinth. The royal family took everyone suspected of having enemy ties away. We weren't exactly unrelated because of our connection to that man Zarish!"

We saw animosity burning in her eyes, which we frankly found frightening.

Whenever Puseri's anger built up, there was an air about her similar to how she was when she went on a rampage in the ancient labyrinth. Fury raged inside her, and we could feel her trembling.

I had forgotten all about it, but the situation was indeed grave. The hero candidate Zarish, who had been trying to defect to the enemy country, was still in captivity. This wasn't public yet, likely because the news would damage the government too.

In short, the man who was supposed to save the country was secretly conspiring with the enemy and trying to take down the raid team. Puseri's team was living in peace because this information hadn't been released, but this could all change at any minute.

I then remembered our original objective. The whole reason we had invited Team Diamond to the manor was to get them to help with managing it. It was completely selfish, but things were different now that we knew her situation.

"Puseri, how would you like to live here?" I asked.

My voice came out softer than intended, surprising not just Puseri but myself too. Emboldened by Marie's hand holding my own, I continued.

"To tell you the truth, we need more people. We promise a peaceful life here, and this will be a place of respite during the labyrinth raids. I don't know how the war will go, but don't you think the people will be happy when we successfully clear the labyrinth?"

Puseri gasped. I had offered something she had wanted so badly that it

made a proud woman like her cry. It seemed she could hardly believe it.

Her lips flapped wordlessly, but there was a light in her twilight-colored eyes. She clung to us, overwhelmed and unable to find the words. Yet her body felt much more delicate than I had imagined as she wept.

Her warm tears stained my shoulders. They were tears of kindness from having agonized over her dilemma all alone. She clutched at us, and we could tell she cared deeply for her friends now that the hero candidate's mind control had no hold over her.

Puseri continued to cry until the sun eventually set completely.

§

The next morning, I was sweeping the front of the entrance with a broom. That is, I had gone to sleep, went to work, left on time, enjoyed a nice meal, read a book, and fallen asleep before getting here.

I thought it was a bit strange that I was working in this world again, even though I never did overtime. I wondered how many hours I worked in a day when I heard noisy footsteps behind me.

A dark-skinned woman skidded to a stop, scattering the leaves I had just swept into the air. I looked up, wondering why she was harassing me, and saw a dark elf in a maid outfit standing in a defiant stance.

"Oh? Why are you dressed like that, Eve?" I asked.

"Hehe, I got hired. Puseri made a deal with Wridra, and I get to live here from now on. Ahh... No matter how much I worked before, all I got was dried bread, but it's all gonna change now," Eve said dreamily.

I acted surprised, then glanced toward the lobby to see the members of Team Diamond dressed in similar attire. We had spent so much time coming up with a game plan, but it had worked out in a completely unexpected way. I suppose you can never really predict how people truly connect.

Eve looked like she was dying to show off just how competent she was. She pulled me into a headlock for some reason, and her glossy lips spoke to me from up close.

"I may not look like it, but I managed that giant manor of black roses all by myself. Remember when I was in Japan that one time? I heard that everyone had no idea how to take care of the garden while I was gone. Funny, right?"

“Really? That’s impressive,” I said. “I think you’ll find the work here worthwhile then. Even if you end up tired at the end of the day, there will be a hot bath and massage waiting for you.”

Eve nodded repeatedly. Then someone called her over, and she dashed away in the blink of an eye.

She was so full of energy that she made my head spin, but that vitality of hers would be quite an asset since this hall was several kilometers from edge to edge. Eve turned around and said, “It’s gonna be a lot of fun living with you guys!” Her cheerfulness brought a smile to my face, and I wondered if all that energy was coming from the boar meat she had eaten last night.

I remembered Puseri’s words from last night. As a dark elf, prejudice must have affected Eve more than any of us. But seeing her having fun with her friends showing no signs of such struggles gave me a bit of hope. *Perhaps women are far tougher than men*, I thought.

I had a feeling that at this rate, it wouldn’t be long until we cleared the third floor of the labyrinth too.

The second-floor hall’s pre-opening had come to a close with good results for the guests and us.

I later learned that the women were moved by how clean the restroom was. Who could’ve guessed that they would rate it higher than the painstakingly designed hot springs, lake, garden, or buildings that blended Japanese and Western styles?

That was how I found out that the residents of the fantasy world had slightly unusual values.

Chapter of Betrayal, Episode 3: The Elf, the Dragon, and the Plastic Model

Autumn was the perfect time for sleep.

The temperature and humidity were perfect, and the sun slowly rose in the morning to warm up our comforter. The urge to go back to sleep was overpowering, but it was a weekday, so I had no choice but to wake up.

The clock in my room had its alarm turned off because whenever I slept in the dream world, I would automatically wake up on this side. I never had an issue living like this, but things were a bit different now that I had someone living with me.

When I opened my eyes, white-cotton hair filled my view. She wrapped her arms around me, and her warmth made my desire to sleep even stronger.

It seemed such desires weren't just limited to humans. Marie must have sensed I was trying to get up and clutched my pajamas tight.

She was laying her head on my chest, and her thighs had me locked in place under the covers. I wondered what she would do next, but she only breathed softly in her sleep. It was almost as if she was enjoying her sleep even more because she knew I had to get up.

A sleep-loving elf like her might be rare, but the other resident in this room was similarly determined to keep sleeping.

My heart jumped as a bare arm stretched out from behind me. Slender fingers held me down, and I felt someone yawn against my neck.

It was then that I remembered Wridra was visiting for the first time in a while. Surely, I wasn't the only one who felt blessed that the whimsical Arkdragon came to Japan with us like this occasionally.

The soft sound of sleepy breathing before and behind me was lulling me dangerously toward slumber. Sleeping now would be terrible, as I would wake up in the other world, and I'd need to fall back to sleep again. It would be a strange situation where I would fall asleep for the second time knowing I'd have to sleep for the third.

“Wake up, Marie,” I said.

Since my arms and legs were locked in place, I had no choice but to tickle her nose to nose.

I knew Marie had been awake for a while. As proof, she giggled quietly with each poke of the nose. She was pretending to sleep, but I really had to get up, so I continued with the prodding. Her chuckling got louder and louder until she finally burst into full-blown laughter.

“Oh, you ruined my pleasant morning,” Marie complained. “Don’t you know it’s rude to tickle someone’s nose with your own nose?”

“I didn’t know elves had such rules of etiquette,” I said. “But we need to get up now, or I might get fired.”

I actually still had some buffer, and she knew this well. We both wanted to have some time to take it easy in the morning.

Marie glanced behind me and smiled. It seemed she was looking forward to spending the day with Wridra.

“Excited?” I asked. “What are you going to do today?”

“As usual, we have no plans in particular. We’ll walk around the neighborhood, eat something we rarely eat, and maybe watch a movie or something,” Marie answered.

Seeing her happy grin made me feel happy too. I would spend my day trying to get my work done so I could go home on time. As I considered this, Marie furrowed her brow.

“Wridra’s a foodie, so I’m sure she’ll want to eat something good. I remember one time, she was doing circles on the bed, crying that she wanted some Chinese food,” she said.

“You saw that, did you...?”

I sensed Wridra rising slowly behind me, and she exhaled into my neck. I could picture the exasperated expression on her face without even looking at her. She then placed her chin on my shoulder and pointed a finger at Mariabelle.

“You are quite the food-loving elf yourself. Your stomach nearly burst open from stuffing yourself many times before,” she said accusingly.

“W-Well, the amount I eat is still considered healthy. I exercise to make up for it too... Hey, don’t poke my nose!” Marie protested.

Marie’s nose got squished by Wridra’s, and she made a face like she was drowning. She moved behind me in an attempt to escape, but Wridra

precisely pinpointed Marie's nose with her dragon's intuition and laughed in amusement at the elf girl's displeased expression.

"Here, allow me to violate your so-called elven rule of etiquette. Come, stop trying to flee and rub noses with me," Wridra said.

It seemed Wridra was excited about being in Japan for the first time in a while and getting a bit carried away. Something soft and heavy weighed down on my shoulders...but I decided not to think about it, or Marie would get upset with me. I couldn't help but laugh as I watched the dragon and elf rub their noses together.

"It has been quite some time since I have had such a sickeningly sweet morning. You two have been escalating in my absence. It is truly inexcusable," Wridra complained behind me, then I heard the bed creak. I couldn't turn around to look, but the Arkdragon rose, unconcerned that she completely exposed her skin. Her bare feet pitter-pattered across the floor, her tail likely swinging around behind her, as she moved toward the fridge.

Seeing these two women sometimes made me forget I was in Tokyo, but I had gotten completely used to having the elf and dragon around by now. After all, it had been about six months since we had started living together.

Lately, Wridra had been busy raising her children and managing the second floor, so her visits had become increasingly uncommon. Yet she had accepted Marie's invitation to visit on this weekday so she could spread her wings for a bit.

"Hm, I am not yet accustomed to the autumn season. What to wear...? Perhaps I will try out a new style this time. That should do it. What say you?"

I wasn't allowed to turn around until she finished dressing, so I waited for her permission before I looked... But it turned out to be a trap.

"Bff!" I spit out in surprise when I saw Wridra wearing nothing but stockings up to her hips and tiny underwear with her beautiful, peach-shaped butt facing me.

"Wridra! Cover yourself up, will you?" Marie complained.

"Hah, hah, I was merely asking for opinions on the quality of my stockings. Goodness, elves these days only get more possessive constantly. How terrifying."

Of course, Marie had immediately covered up my eyes, and she was shouting in a fluster right next to my ear.

To be honest, Wridra's allure was dizzying. That aside, it had been some time since we had had such a lively morning, and Marie seemed to be having fun with Wridra's mischief.

After some time, Wridra finally finished dressing. I waited for Marie's permission before turning around to see the Arkdragon in brightly colored knitwear.

She looked more intellectual than usual in a navy wrap skirt, stockings, and formal shoes. But the knitwear emphasized her large breasts, which would surely garner extra attention from men.

Marie hopped off the bed and said, "I see you really went for an 'autumn' type of outfit. It's different from your usual style but looks very nice on you. I've always thought you look smarter in clothes that don't show off much skin."

"Hah, hah, you will not find many with greater intellect than myself," Wridra said. "It is a shame people judge others based on appearance."

Marie had an interest in clothes and loved to groom her friends. She took Wridra by the hand and sat her down on a chair, then brought a brush from the restroom and started to do her hair. It seemed she was going for a wealthy, high-class woman type of look.

"If you two are going on a date while I'm at work, do you want me to prepare some food you can eat on the go? Now's your chance to put in any requests," I said.

"You are sickeningly considerate as always," Wridra replied. "Very well. I will request plenty of tuna mayo rice balls. And whatever you do, do not skimp on the filling."

Wridra was a woman who knew what she wanted. She had loved tuna mayo since she first tried it, and it'd been her favorite ever since.

I cooked a big portion of rice, and as I was preparing breakfast, I heard the girls talking about autumn fashion, like "Can you extend the collar up to your neck?" and "Let's use a ribbon to tie your hair."

They were all ready to go by the time I had finished making breakfast.

"Yup, you look like a classy lady all right," I said. "I've always thought you give off a very different impression depending on your outfit. You could even pass for a student at the University of Tokyo."

"There is something I have been thinking about as well. You tend to be indirect with your compliments. How about you simply say I am beautiful

instead?" Wridra smirked provocatively. I wondered what had gotten into her, but I was a man who didn't back down, even against the legendary Arkdragon. That'd be the case if we were in the dream world.

In any case, I smiled at her and said, "Oh, I wouldn't say you're stunningly beautiful or anything. But maybe I should tell you that you look cute today."

She actually looked surprisingly cute when she reacted with wide-eyed blinking. Of course, she kicked me hard in the butt immediately after.

By the time I had to go to work, Marie had changed into a classy lady's outfit. She had a pochette tucked under her arm, a long-sleeved blouse with a ribbon around her neck, and a chic-colored dress with knee-high socks, matching Wridra's style.

"You two look nice all dressed up for your date. I'll be going now, so make sure you don't lose the key," I said.

"Have a nice day! I'll enjoy going around the neighborhood with Wridra," Marie replied.

She beckoned me closer with her finger, and I panicked slightly. I didn't think she would want to do this in front of Wridra, but Marie pursed her lips, and I couldn't argue. I crouched lower, and she gave me a goodbye kiss on the cheek.

I thought I saw Wridra mouth the word "die" with a smile, but I hoped I had just imagined it. It appeared that she considered this forgivable, as she waved goodbye with Marie before I headed out to work.

The thought of those two going out together once worried me, but I knew they'd be fine now. I was looking forward to finding out about the discoveries they would make together in this quiet neighborhood.

I walked toward the elevator, hoping they would have stories for me when I got back.

Once it got warm later in the day, they would lock the door and head out for their walk. I tightened my tie, excited to return home as soon as possible.

§

The elf and dragon seemed like a strange pair at first glance, but it felt

completely natural for them. They thought of each other like sisters and could find joy in the most insignificant things together. The dragon even seemed a bit—no, greatly—amused when she was just pressing the elevator button.

"Ah... I cannot push this button as a cat, so this is quite satisfying," she said.

"But you can press the button on the remote. You know, I've never heard of a cat that watches Japanese period dramas all the time," Marie replied.

"They are truly remarkable. You can judge the director's skills through the sword fights, and there is a sense of wabi-sabi to them. Ah, here it is."

The elevator door opened, and they entered and descended to the lower floor. Wridra went on about why period dramas were so great but failed to pique Marie's interest.

When the door opened, an autumn sky awaited them. The sun was shining high above, but the wind felt chilly against the skin. Both looked up at the clouds in the sky like plumes of smoke, then exhaled in unison.

"The air is so clean, and the sky seems more vast than usual. It's harvest season this time of year, isn't it? Maybe we could do some sort of celebratory festival on the second floor," Marie suggested.

"Hm, I can already imagine the lizardmen going mad with excitement," Wridra said.

A festival did sound enticing. Wridra thought about how fun it would be to have a day of delicious-smelling food stalls, drinking, and dancing.

"I shall give it a fair consideration. It is good to change things up every once in a while. I know such celebrations can enrich our daily lives."

It had been a spontaneous suggestion, but Wridra appeared quite eager to do it.

Every world had its annual events. This would be a celebration of successfully reaching another milestone and giving thanks for a bountiful harvest. The two agreed it'd be a good opportunity to look back on the past year and nodded at each other. They walked along an empty street, enjoying the somewhat productive conversation.

"What should we do? The common ones are harvest festivals and New Year's... Oh, it would make sense to celebrate the creation of the second floor hall," Marie suggested.

"That would indeed be the most relevant for us. Hm, that just reminded

me that something crucial is missing in our manor."

Marie blinked. They had started walking toward the shopping district before they knew it, and they saw various shops opening their shutters.

The shopping district retained a downtown flavor, and there would likely be cats hanging out here once it got warmer. One would need to be careful walking around with dango in hand, as they could get surrounded by a mob of hungry cats.

"Something crucial? Hmm, what could it be...? The building is already done, and the lake site is being prepared as we speak. The Japanese garden is pretty much finished, so I can't imagine what else is missing," Marie pondered aloud.

"It is something much more simple," Wridra replied. "In fact, we can see it all over this shopping district."

Marie groaned and tilted her head in thought. What could it be? There were apparel stores, cafés, and children's shops in a row. She thought Wridra was talking about some sort of sweets shop, but those weren't "all over" the shopping district like the Arkdragon had said.

"Hmm... Can we see it right now?" she asked.

"Of course. There are so many of them, in fact, that you could not count them all. You might even say it is something the shops value above all else. Now, you have ten seconds to figure it out."

Marie made a panicked squeal, then put serious consideration into it. However, the manor and shopping district were so different that she couldn't find the similarities. Instead, she focused on the hint that it was something the shops valued most. As she stared at an aged shop, one thing came into focus.

"The sign...with the shop's name on it... I know, we're missing a name for our manor!"

"Hah, hah, correct. Without a name for the manor, we would be celebrating a nameless milestone. We will, of course, need Shirley and Kitase present when we decide on one."

With that, Wridra pointed at a shop. Marie looked up and found the words "Tajima Model Shop" in black letters on yellow plastic.

"Team Diamond's manor is called the manor of black roses, isn't it? Distinctive names like that are easy to remember," she said.

She thought Wridra would agree with "Exactly," but the Arkdragon

remained silent. Curious, Marie turned to her, then noticed she was staring intently at something in the shop ahead.

It was like a vending machine but much smaller. There was a slot to insert hundred-yen coins, with a handle on the front that could be spun around. There were transparent balls called capsule toys stuffed in the machine, which had drawn the Arkdragon's interest. Wridra gestured that she wanted to try it once, which Marie shot down, and she made a sulking expression that ruined her pretty face.

Marie was in charge of handling money in this world. Even though Wridra didn't have authority to overturn her judgment, she wasn't about to back down.

"Consider it a part of social studies..." she said.

"If you buy a toy, that's going to take away from your snack budget. Is that fine?" Marie asked.

Silence.

It seemed there was no bargaining with the elf girl. Such a pity, but when the options were between sweets and capsule toys with unknown contents, the answer was obvious.

"Hm, then I suppose I should stick with sweets," Wridra conceded. "So, what is being sold in this store? They seem to have many cardboard boxes inside."

"I'm not sure. Kazuhiro-san has never visited a place like this," Marie replied.

She peeked into the building and saw the dimly lit interior with square boxes piled high to the ceiling. After living in Japan for half a year, Marie could generally figure out what sorts of merchandise stores handled, but she had difficulty knowing what this one had, no matter how much she squinted through the glass.

It had an old-fashioned vibe befitting the downtown atmosphere that starkly contrasted the colorful boxes, which spurred the duo's curiosity. The dragon and elf opened the glass door as if drawn to it.

"Excuse me... Whoa, so many boxes!"

The walls and shelves were buried in boxes big and small. Meanwhile, the interior smelled like a faint mixture of plastic and dust. Unfamiliar ships, fighter jets, and stumpy robots were illustrated on the boxes, leaving the two in a state of wordless confusion.

“Wel...come.” A white-haired old man greeted them, but when he opened his eyes, he went to the back of the shop as if he had just remembered something. Marie and Wridra exchanged looks and waited. The old man put his glasses on, then returned with an old book in hand.

“Ah... I canto speeku...” he said in broken English.

“Hello, what do you sell here?” Marie asked in Japanese.

The old man blinked, then put his now-useless book down. The cover read, “English Conversations Anyone Can Do.” But judging by his earlier attempt, it didn’t seem to be very effective.

“Oh, you surprised me. You speak Japanese so well. Can your friend speak it too?” the man asked.

“Of course I can. I have been living in Japan for half a year now,” Wridra responded.

The man’s wrinkled eyes opened wide, impressed. He then brought over some folding chairs and gestured for the two to sit down. There was an open space in the back of the store, which might have been used to chat with customers. The two sat down as prompted, and Marie admired the room’s calm atmosphere.

The man chuckled, pleased by his unexpected guests.

“Come to think of it, I’ve heard of a girl as cute as a fairy walking around these parts. They must have been talking about you, miss...”

“My name’s Mariabelle, sir. And this is my friend Wridra.”

Wridra smiled, though she had her attention on the unreliable-looking foldable chair. The old man had a welcoming air about him.

“There’s something very special about you two young ladies, like you came straight from the cover of a picture book. I’m happy you decided to visit this old store of mine.”

Wridra chuckled and looked amused that the man had called her a “young lady.” She couldn’t blame him, though, as no one could have guessed she had been alive for a thousand years.

The old man looked up at the ceiling as if he had just remembered something.

“Ah, you wanted to know what I sell here.”

He muttered that a non-Japanese person might not know about it, then picked up a nearby box. After he placed it on the table, the duo’s pale-purple and obsidian eyes peered at it. The box was slowly opened to reveal

some inexplicable objects inside.

“What are these?” Marie asked. “Boards with a lot of gaps in them?”

“They are quite detailed, and there is a regularity to the design,” Wridra noted. “They seem to be parts for something, but they are all connected with pieces of plastic.”

The old man chuckled in amusement as the two women stared with great interest. He then smiled and grunted as he stood up.

“I’ll make some tea while you two try to figure out what it is. I think that would be more fun than just giving you the answer.”

They told him that the tea wouldn’t be necessary, but his smile only grew as he told them, “You still haven’t solved the mystery.” Wridra seemed to have lighthearted fun earlier, but now she had a mystery to solve. It would damage her pride as an Arkdragon if she couldn’t answer a question from a human.

“Hmm... There are six of these slabs full of gaps. They are each different in color as well,” Wridra observed. She furrowed her brow, then picked up one of the plastic pieces.

Humans created many strange contraptions, and they sometimes made things that far exceeded her expectations. Cooking was once the prime example of this, but this object had no smell or taste. The old man had a strange air about him, so she wondered if he was using some sort of illusion.

Suddenly, Marie turned to her, wide-eyed. She looked as if she had just made a great discovery and turned a box in Wridra’s direction. It featured an old picture of what seemed to be some sort of vehicle.

“I think this is what it’s supposed to be!” Marie exclaimed.

Wridra furrowed her brow as she stared at the piece of plastic again. She wasn’t seeing it; it looked nothing like the picture. Marie then pointed out each piece as if she were teaching a student that was slow to catch on.

“See? This round part is just like the picture here. If you connect here and here... Do you see it now?”

“Hm! Yes, I see it!”

The old man returned just as they discovered the vital clue. The sliding door rattled open, and he handed them tea from a tray.

“You ladies sure are smart. These are called plastic model kits. This one hasn’t been assembled yet, but with a little time and effort...it’ll end up

looking like this."

With that, he placed the finished model on the table: some sort of large, foreign, two-wheeled vehicle. They recognized it from a previous car ride, and the two couldn't help but let out an awestruck cheer at the model with rubber tires, precise wheels, and a charming design that inspired childlike wonder.

They couldn't believe such an exquisite toy came about by putting the pieces together like a type of three-dimensional puzzle. They were just pieces of plastic, but a little bit of painting and filing breathed life into them, making them look just like the real thing.

"Ah, this is beautiful! I have always thought large motorcycles are aesthetically pleasing," Wridra said with amazement.

"Ha ha, Italian bikes are masculine yet classy. You see many motorcycles nowadays, but I think something about these makes them special."

The old man paused to take a sip of tea.

People were letting go of things like motorcycles, cars, and even luxury items in general. It wasn't just that transportation methods had improved since the old days, but it seemed people had moved on to other forms of entertainment. The old man wasn't lamenting, however. He was all smiles as he put a plate down, which had something that looked like charred nuts. He gestured for the girls to eat.

Ginkgo nuts were part of the autumn tradition. Mariabelle made a strange face at their distinctive smell. Monkeys and even mice didn't eat ginkgo because of its sulfuric scent. Still skeptical, she tried the smooth, green, bean-like object and was surprised by its depth of flavor. The elf and dragon exchanged wide-eyed looks. The old man laughed again, amused by their reactions.

"Do you remember there was a ginkgo biloba tree nearby? This is one treat that won't get lost in the sands of time."

It seemed the two had found another hint for the manor. Some things faded away while others aged gracefully, and the difference was the connection they had with people. This clue would surely help when the time came to name their manor or events.

There was something distinctly comforting about the old man's smile that reminded them of Kitase.

The sliding door rattled open, and the elf girl was holding something she hadn't had before. The square box had an illustration of a large tank on it, and she was holding it up with both hands like she had discovered a treasure.

"Ahh, what an amazing purchase! I hope we didn't spend too much," Marie said.

"Certainly not," Wridra said. "He gave us quite the discount. It was kind of him to lend us some tools as well."

"Right! Now, let's go build this tank together!"

The rosy-cheeked elf looked quite adorable in the old man's eyes. Old-fashioned plastic models were being forgotten as time went on, but the old man couldn't help but smile when looking at the girls. He was still a businessman through and through, seeming to have thrown in a shrimp and pulled out a whale.

§

"I'm home... Huh?"

I looked around, but nobody was there. No, I heard some cheerful chatter from the bathroom, so they were probably in there together. I tried calling out to them and heard an energetic "Welcome home!" as expected. I could tell they had had a fun day just from the tone of their voices.

I loosened my tie and removed my jacket, then noticed something unfamiliar: a bunch of ginkgo nuts on the table and a finely crafted plastic model tank.

"Hm...? Ginkgo and a tank?" I said to myself.

I picked up each of them, then my brain stopped processing. The souvenirs the two ladies had brought home were completely different from what I had expected.

It seemed they had had another unusual adventure. I couldn't wait to hear about it once they were done with their bath. So, I picked up a ginkgo nut and enjoyed its distinctly fall fragrance.

Some rice cooked with wild vegetables and ginkgo nuts sounded good for dinner. There would be beer too, of course. After all, it would be rude not to serve some refreshments to the ladies from the fantasy world.

And so I hung my suit on a hanger, looking forward to what tonight would bring.

The bathroom forbidden to men slid open with a rattle.

Wridra walked out with a towel hung over her shoulder. From the inside, I heard “Don’t be a child and blow-dry your hair.” This told me she had fled from the hair dryer. I wasn’t sure about dragons, but cats hated the noise they made. I turned around, and my eyes met Wridra’s as she ran away from Marie.

She was wearing the cat paw-print shirt Marie had picked out, and her hair was still wet. She seemed little different from when she was a cat with the way she took long, light-footed strides and sat down on the table.

“Hi, Wridra. How was your first time back in Japan in a while?” I asked.

“It is very comfortable here,” she replied. “Not only are there no foreign enemies to think about, but there is something special about this place. I believe it has something to do with the air here.”

She folded one leg as she spoke, and I showed her a clear glass from where I stood in the kitchen. I then flashed her a can of beer with my other hand, and her expression brightened.

“Aha, yes! I am not a cat today, meaning I can enjoy a postbath beer! Make haste and bring it here. I have been away for a long while. I say I am entitled to a bit of spoiling!”

“Yes, yes, welcome to Japan, Ms. Wridra. I’ll be sure to spoil you rotten tonight. Now, let’s start with this grilled fish. It should go nicely with your drink,” I said.

This was a good opportunity to have her taste test for Marie. I had cooked fish before, but those dishes weren’t all that popular. She was happy that I had made it for her, but she had already eaten a lot of fish in the dream world.

I brought out a beer bottle and glasses, and Wridra was delighted. There was a luster to her still-wet hair that reminded me of crow feathers. Maybe it was because she had just taken a bath, but her bare skin and smile looked radiant.

“Hah, hah, such lavishness... Top-quality alcohol and food are served to me as I sit here. It is quite satisfying to have everything taken care of for me,” she said.

“You’re living like that in the other world too,” I pointed out. “The manor’s really coming together. Now that you’ve gotten used to luxury, I wonder what the Arkdragon will want next.”

Wridra seemed like she was going to say something, but she lost the words. Her obsidian eyes were drawn to the freshly grilled saury on the plate put before her. The saury’s Japanese name, “sanma,” contains the character for “katana,” which the fish resembled in both shape and color. Although they were a bit pricey, I wanted her to enjoy the seasonal fish—mainly so she could taste test.

“Hm, it looks almost golden brown when cooked. Do I top it off with this white thing next to it?” Wridra asked.

“Yup, add the grated daikon radish and soy sauce and try it. I haven’t removed the guts, which might not be to your taste.”

Wridra’s expression darkened slightly at the mention of the fish guts. Normally, the guts were removed before the fish was served. People had a preconception that they were bitter, tasted funny, and brought down the flavor of the fish. She gave me an accusing look as if to ask why I hadn’t removed them, but quickly changed her mind.

“You are not the type of man to save time by sacrificing quality, nor would you waste food,” she said. “But I must admit, I am a tad disappointed that my first Japanese meal in some time is grilled fish.”

It was actually a very simple dish to prepare. All I had to do was rub some salt onto it, then cook it over a medium heat. I had a feeling she would like it, though.

Wridra topped off the fish with some grated daikon, and the skin ripped open with a crackle as her chopsticks sank in. She then tossed the meat in her mouth without hesitation.

It was an eruption of flavor. The fat content was, astoundingly, over thirty percent, comparable to that of toro. It was the best time of year to have saury, and the delectable fat spread throughout the Arkdragon’s mouth. Her eyes shot open at the aromatically charred skin and rich fat content from the thin meat.

“Oho! Mmm!”

As she chewed, it became obvious that there was no bitterness to the fish guts. Instead of the distinctly bitter taste, the organs were filled with luscious sweetness. This came as another surprise, and this time, she

squeezed her eyes shut.

The salt and grated daikon removed any fishy odor, leaving a refreshing aftertaste. It was no wonder there were so many fans of saury with its appetizing aroma, crispy skin, and rich, fatty meat.

Wridra swallowed at last and mouthed the word "delicious." She then vigorously downed her beer with audible gulps, as if her body demanded it, and slammed the glass on the table. That was when she finally voiced her review.

"Deeelicious! And it goes perfectly with alcohol! Mmph, 'tis the perfect dish to go with a postbath beer. It seems autumn is the season to come and visit Japan."

"I'm glad it suits your palate. Marie should like it too then," I said.

Wridra shot me an accusatory look that said, "Did you use me as a guinea pig?" But that didn't stop her from continuing to eat and drink. Eating good food usually made people forget about everything else.

Sure enough, she eventually leaned back on her chair with her chest puffed out and let out a satisfied sigh. She mumbled something about saury, which I took as a good sign. Then the door finally slid open, and Marie peered in. She took in the savory scent, then noticed the beer and grilled fish.

"Hey! You started eating without me?" Marie complained as she walked over. But ten minutes later, she enjoyed the flavors of autumn as she sat in the same position as Wridra and slid down her chair with her butt protruding from the edge.

I was happy that the visitors from the fantasy world thoroughly enjoyed the combination of rice cooked with ginkgo, wild vegetables, saury, and beer.

"Oh, you went to a model kit shop? Come to think of it, I think I saw one in the shopping district. I forgot it existed since I rarely go there."

While they were taking a bath, I had been taken aback by the strange combination of ginkgo and a tank on the table. I was dying to know how they had spent their time and where, and they had happily obliged. Having enjoyed plenty of food and drink after her bath, Marie now flashed me a somewhat inebriated smile.

"Wridra and I had so much fun making the tank. The old gentleman

there was kind enough to teach us how to put it together," she said.

"Behold, Kitase. This tank is our creation. Do you have the eye to recognize the authentic quality?"

The drunken Arkdragon moved the tank closer to me. She looked like she was expecting compliments, so I had to oblige.

"It's hard to believe you two are beginners at this. The attention to detail is really impressive. If you ask me, it looks like a pro made it," I said.

After a slight pause, the elf and dragon's smiles widened even further. Maybe they had discovered the joy of creation because they were always so serious about having fun. Overjoyed, they shivered and squirmed a bit. They were clearly satisfied with their work, so it was my turn to praise their accomplishment and make them feel good.

"Hehe, I knew you would understand what a masterpiece we've created," Marie said happily.

"Yes, he certainly has a discerning eye, if not much else. Hah, hah!" Wridra agreed.

Their joy was adorable and infectious. They squirmed some more and flashed their pearly white teeth, making my lips curl into a smile. Then I glanced to the side and noticed an unfamiliar toolbox, which was presumably used to build the model kit.

"You mentioned you borrowed tools from the shop owner. Do you want me to go with you when you return them?" I asked.

"That's okay," Marie replied. "I know you'll be busy with work again tomorrow. We'll be fine on our own."

"Yes, and that place smelled like cats. We just may play with a different guest tomorrow," Wridra said.

"Ah! Really? Oh, oh, I can't wait!" Marie exclaimed, clutching Wridra's sleeve and rocking her side to side. Maybe it was because she looked different from humans, but Marie used to be apprehensive about going out. So, I was relieved to see so much improvement in that regard.

She was usually fine if Wridra or I were with her, but she had found a new friend in the model kit shop owner. I hoped she would keep expanding her horizons this way so she could go on a walk anywhere without worrying.

Another thought occurred to me: Since the Arkdragon could create anything, what if she made a tank in the other world? That would be

completely unacceptable. Tanks and robots would completely ruin the fantasy world, so I would have to sit Wridra down for a long talk and make her reconsider if that ever happened.

It was time to wash the dishes after the meal, but I became the target of concentrated fire from the tank in the drunkards' hands. It tickled, so I wished they'd cut it out.

I took a seat next to Marie.

Maybe she had gotten too carried away, or she was just exhausted from creating her masterpiece, but she was face down on the table, fast asleep. I put my hand on her back, then she hugged me back as if she were already used to the routine. Her body was warm from being sleepy, and she breathed softly into my ear. I noticed her sweet smell as I rose quietly.

She was as light as usual. I picked her up with ease, and her hold around me tightened. Marie had been worried about gaining weight recently, but she really had no reason to be concerned.

I tried not to make a noise as I stepped across the floor, then lowered her onto the bed while supporting her head. Her lips formed a smile, and her breathing pattern became more rhythmic. She once told me it felt like she was floating in the air.

I knew she enjoyed being carried to bed like this. I pulled up the blanket to cover her exposed belly button, and she smiled again. I patted her on the stomach, then stood.

"Now comes the hard part," I said to myself.

I turned around to face the other woman lying face down on the table.

I had a suspicion Wridra was just pretending to be asleep. After all, I'd never heard of an Arkdragon drinking herself to sleep.

Should I carry her to the bed too? But Wridra was someone's wife and a mother, so I had some reservations about putting my hands on her. I thought about it for some time, then spoke to Wridra, her eyes still closed.

"I did say I'd spoil you tonight. Miss Wridra, shall I carry you to the bed?"

One of her eyes peeked open, then she burst out in laughter, unable to hold it in anymore. Chuckling, she said, "Yes, very well. You shall carry me with the utmost care. You are one fortunate man... I do not recall any human being allowed to carry an Arkdragon."

“As you wish. Even if I might stumble a bit if you’re heavy, so be careful,” I said.

“You absolute fool!” she scolded, then cleared her throat and closed her eyes again. Her breathing became regular, as if she were preparing to sleep, and my special mission had begun.

I placed a hand behind her knees and the other behind her back, then slowly rose. I was a bit surprised that she was much lighter than I had expected. Here was this woman with unfathomable power, whom I had yet to see unleash her full strength, now being lifted in my arms. It was surreal.

No, I *have* seen her go all out just once. When I snuck into her dwelling, she released a fire breath that evaporated me in an instant. It was a funny story to look back at now, and we’d likely laugh about it while having a drink as long as we hung out.

There were two fateful events that day: I met Marie and my friend Wridra, and I began my days of adventure. Wonders surrounded me before I knew it, and call me greedy, but I couldn’t bear to let go of any of it.

I quietly set Wridra down on the bed, then realized she had really fallen asleep. She and Marie breathed rhythmically, snoozing away in the pleasant autumn evening.

After preparing to depart into my dreams, I joined the other two in bed. It was warm from their sleeping bodies, and Marie embraced me unconsciously as I went under the covers. I could tell I would fall asleep in no time, and I opened the door to the dream world with Marie nuzzling up to my forehead.

As an aside, my present for the next day was a hexahedron puzzle. Marie’s intelligence shone with this toy as she put it together with breakneck speed. Wridra and I had gotten worked up and challenged her repeatedly, but we found out there was another thing I could never beat Marie at.

Even so, I felt astoundingly good about it.

Afterword

Hello, this is Makishima Suzuki.

It's been quite some time since I've written to you here. A whole year or so has passed since the last volume. It took a long time, but I'm happy to say that the summer part of the story is now complete thanks to Hobby Japan's kindness. Thank you very much. Since I had the opportunity, I wrote a bit about the start of autumn in this volume as well. (laughs)

In the summer, Ms. Elf was busy enjoying the heck out of the pool, beach, Banana Wani Garden, and hot springs. Even though she seems like a frail Spirit Sorceress who's quite young for an elf, she has a strong heart and the drive to make things happen. I could learn a thing or two from her as a weak modern person, and I'd love to take a vacation soon myself.

The pandemic is still ongoing at the time of this writing, and it seems caution will still be needed for some time when traveling or going out. Fortunately, I haven't been infected yet, but several people around me have contracted the virus, so I still want to do what I can for prevention.

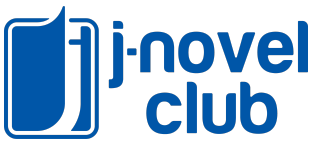
Now that summer has ended, the season will now change to autumn. Autumn is known as the eating and reading season, and as the trees change color, I'm always reminded each year that it's a season full of change. I hope to convey these changes through this title, so I hope for your kind support once again!

Lastly, I'd like to thank Yappen for taking time out of their busy schedule to draw the illustrations for this book. Maybe it's the summer setting, but the women in the illustrations were so full of life and charm, and I thoroughly enjoyed looking at them.

I'd also like to thank Aonoesu for working on the manga. Until the manga, I'd lived in a world of imagination and text, so it was amazing to see this work so clearly drawn out. The latest manga, volume seven, features Kazuhiho's visit back home, and there's a big development in the relationship between him and Marie, which had been somewhat childish up to that point. Please don't miss it!

Well then, I look forward to writing to you once again and will start planning out my vacation. I wish you all happiness and health.

Makishima Suzuki



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by Makishima Suzuki

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